



MRS Guidelines for Employee Research

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MRS is the world's largest association for people and organisations that provide or use market, social and opinion research, business intelligence and customer insight.



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Introduction

These Guidelines interpret the MRS Code of Conduct (revised 2014) 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.

Research is founded upon the willing co-operation of the public and of business organisations. It relies on the confidence of those involved that it is conducted honestly, objectively, without unwelcome intrusion and without harm to participants. Its purpose is to collect and analyse information and not to create sales or to influence the opinions of anyone participating.

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 Company Partners and breaches may result in disciplinary action. The guidance that follows the rules provides interpretation and additional best practice. Readers 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.

The Principles of the MRS Code of Conduct:

1. Researchers shall ensure that participation in their activities is based on voluntary informed consent.
2. Researchers shall be straightforward and honest in all their professional and business relationships.
3. Researchers shall be transparent as to the subject and purpose of data collection.
4. Researchers shall respect the confidentiality of information collected in their professional activities.
5. Researchers shall respect the rights and well being of all individuals.
6. Researchers shall ensure that participants are not harmed or adversely affected by their professional activities.
7. Researchers shall balance the needs of individuals, clients, and their professional activities.
8. Researchers shall exercise independent professional judgement in the design, conduct and reporting of their professional activities.
9. Researchers shall ensure that their professional activities are conducted by persons with appropriate training, qualifications and experience.
10. Researchers shall protect the reputation and integrity of the profession.

Definitions

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.

Employee:

An employee is a person who is hired to provide services to a company or organisation in exchange for compensation and who does not provide these services as part of an independent business. It should be understood in its widest sense covering full time and part time employees, as well as temporary and agency workers.

Definitions used in the MRS Code of Conduct

Anonymisation:

Anonymisation is the process of removing, obscuring, aggregating or altering identifiers to prevent the likely identification using reasonable means of the individuals to whom the data originally related.

Client:

Client includes any individual, organisation, department or division, including any belonging to the same organisation as the member, which is responsible for commissioning or applying the results from a research project.

Data Collection Process:

A data collection process is any process used to obtain information from or about participants. It includes, but is not limited to, interviews, questionnaires, discussion guides, and stimulus materials, as well as passive data collection.

Identity:

The identity of a participant includes, as well as their name and/or address, any other information which offers a reasonable likelihood that they can be identified by any person or organisation who has access to the information.

Informed consent:

Informed consent is a process by which a participant voluntarily confirms his or her willingness to take part in a particular project, after having been informed of all aspects of the project that are relevant to their decision to participate.

Member:

A Member is an individual who has been admitted to membership of MRS in one of the categories set out the MRS Articles of Association.

For the purposes of applying this Code, an organisation with MRS members that has signed the MRS Company Partner Service Quality Commitment that applies throughout the organisation shall be treated as a Member.

Monitoring

Monitoring is the supervising of activities (such as data collection) to ensure that they meet required objectives and performance targets.

Participant:

A participant is any individual or organisation from or about whom data are collected.

Research:

Research is the collection, use, or analysis of information about individuals or organisations intended to establish facts, acquire knowledge or reach conclusions.

Definitions from the Data Protection Act 1998 used in the MRS Code of Conduct

Personal Data

Data which relate to a living individual who can be identified-

(a) from those data, or

(b) from those data and other information which is in the possession of, or is likely to come into the possession of, the data controller,

and includes any expression of opinion about the individual and any indication of the intentions of the data controller or any other person in respect of the individual.

Data Subject

An individual who is the subject of personal data.

Data Controller

A person who (either alone or jointly or in common with other persons) determines the purposes for which and the manner in which any personal data are, or are to be, processed.

Data Processor

Any person (other than an employee of the data controller) who processes the data on behalf of the data controller.

Processing

Obtaining, recording or holding the information or data or carrying out any operation or set of operations on the information or data, including—

- (a) organisation, adaptation or alteration of the information or data,
- (b) retrieval, consultation or use of the information or data,
- (c) disclosure of the information or data by transmission, dissemination or otherwise making available, or
- (d) alignment, combination, blocking, erasure or destruction of the information or data.

Third party

Any person other than—

- (a) the data subject,
- (b) the data controller, or
- (c) any data processor or other person authorised to process data for the data controller or processor.

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: Communication and Informed Consent

The Rules

- 3. Members must act honestly in their professional activities.**
- 9. Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that the rights and responsibilities of themselves, clients, and sub-contractors are governed by a written contract and/or internal commissioning document.**

Comment: The Data Protection Act 1998 requires contracts for the processing of personal data to be in writing.

- 18. Members must ensure that participants are provided with sufficient information to allow informed consent to be given. This includes:**
 - a. the name of the organisation or individual responsible for data collection;**
 - b. the general subject of the data collection;**
 - c. the purpose of the data collection;**
 - d. whether the data collection is to be recorded and/or observed;**
 - e. who is likely to have access to live or recorded information;**
 - f. the likely length in minutes of the data collection, if asked;**
 - g. any costs likely to be incurred by the participant; and**
 - h. an assurance that the activity is being conducted in accordance with the MRS Code of Conduct.**

Comment: the organisation or individual responsible for data collection is the data controller as defined under the Data Protection Act 1998.

- 26. Members must ensure that the anonymity of participants is preserved unless participants have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on.**
- 39. Members must ensure that participants (including employees in employee research) are not required or pressured to participate.**

Guidance

1. Prior publicity is important to inform employees of the subject and purpose of the research and to help boost rates of response. Any number of media can be deployed to advise employees about the research and its purpose – ranging from in-house magazines and personal briefings to videos and posters as well as e-mail and 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 26, any assurances made in communications with staff regarding the research must be honoured. In this regard, anonymity is of particular importance as it provides a safeguard against adverse effects for the employee as a result of participating in the research.
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.
5. Generally, the terms of an employment contract will not be sufficient to establish free and informed consent, due to the unequal bargaining power of the parties. Research should establish the consent of employee participants as they would in non-employment settings.

2: Sampling and Confidentiality

The Rules

26. Members must ensure that the anonymity of participants is preserved unless participants have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on.

27. Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that anonymisation is effective, with reference to developments in technology and to the data environment into which data are released.

Comment: This rule applies to anonymisation undertaken by members and to anonymisation of data sets undertaken by clients prior to analysis by members. Members are referred to the ICO's Anonymisation Code of Practice.

Comment: Members should be particularly careful that they do not inadvertently identify participants. For example this may arise:

- where sample sizes are very small (such as business and employee research);***
- where data contains sufficient contextual information to permit identification (such as attributes or descriptions of participants);***
- where data can be matched with publicly available information (such as social media profiles); or***
- where data can be matched with other sources (such as transaction histories held by clients).***

28. If participants have given consent for data to be passed on in a form which allows them to be personally identified, members must:

- a. demonstrate that they have taken all reasonable steps to ensure that the data will only be used for the purpose for which the data were collected**
- b. and inform participants as to what will be revealed, to whom and for what purpose.**

29. If participants 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 by the member with the participant and must not be linked back to any other data or used for any other purpose without the explicit consent of the participant.

36. Members must ensure that a participant's right to withdraw from a project at any stage is respected.

40. Members must ensure that any responses given by participants are deleted if requested by participants, and if this is reasonable and practicable.

Guidance

1. Sample design needs to be carefully considered e.g. to avoid unintentionally 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 in a number of different ways, including 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-sample being covered, the employee should be informed of this risk at the beginning of the interview and given the opportunity to withdraw.
3. Where the universe of participants is small, and the participants may be well known to the client, special precautions should be taken to comply with 26. Any research outputs provided to the client should be checked to ensure that participants 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. It may also be necessary to combine results from two or more departments, where the numbers of participants from each of those departments are particularly small.
4. On some occasions employees may want requests or additional comments passed back to an employer. In these circumstances, in accordance with rule 29, 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.

3: Observation

The Rules

- 18. Members must ensure that participants are provided with sufficient information to allow informed consent to be given. This includes:**
- a. the name of the organisation or individual responsible for data collection;**
 - b. the general subject of the data collection;**
 - c. the purpose of the data collection;**
 - d. whether the data collection is to be recorded and/or observed;**
 - e. who is likely to have access to live or recorded information;**
 - f. the likely length in minutes of the data collection, if asked;**
 - g. any costs likely to be incurred by the participant; and**
 - h. an assurance that the activity is being conducted in accordance with the MRS Code of Conduct.**

Comment: the organisation or individual responsible for data collection is the data controller as defined under the Data Protection Act 1998.

- 34. Members must ensure that participants are informed about any recording, monitoring or observation at recruitment and at the beginning of a data collection process.**

Comment: This does not include monitoring (listening to but not recording) telephone interviews for the purpose of quality control where interviewers have been informed that such monitoring takes place.

- 35. Members must ensure that participants are not misled when being asked to take part in a project.**
- 36. Members must ensure that a participant's right to withdraw from a project at any stage is respected.**
- 42. Members must make clear to participants the capacity in which observers are present; clients must be presented as such, even if they are also researchers and/or members of MRS.**

43. There are some situations where observers could adversely affect participants' interests and/or wellbeing, and in such instances, members must

- a. ensure that participants are told at an appropriate stage the identity of any observer who might be present during the exercise.**
- b. where observers may know participants, ensure that participants are informed before the start of the data collection that they are to be observed, with a warning that the observers may include clients who already know them.**
- c. where observers know, or are likely to know, participants, ensure that observers are introduced before the data collection begins and participants given a chance to withdraw.**

Comment: The issue of anonymity and recognition is a particular problem in business-to-business and employee research and as such greater care should be taken for such projects.

Guidance

1. Given the sensitivities of conducting research amongst employees, only in exceptional circumstances should groups or depth interviews be observed or video recorded.
2. In accordance with 34, 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. At the point of recruitment, participants should be informed that whether the interview will be observed by their employer. At the time of the interview, the participant should be told the name and role of the observer before the interview begins.
4. Where permission is to be obtained to distribute 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 and/or made available

- To whom they are likely to be shown
 - For what purposes they are likely to be used.
5. 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 participants intend to be present.

4: Online research

The Rules

- 26. Members must ensure that the anonymity of participants is preserved unless participants have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on.**
- 33. Members must take reasonable steps to ensure all of the following:**
- a. that data collection processes are fit for purpose and clients have been advised accordingly;**
 - b. that the design and content of data collection processes are appropriate for the audience being researched;**
 - c. that participants are able to provide information in a way that reflects the view they want to express, including don't know/ prefer not to say where appropriate;**
 - d. that participants are not led towards a particular point of view;**
 - e. that responses are capable of being interpreted in an unambiguous way; and**
 - f. that personal data collected are relevant and not excessive.**

Guidance

1. When research documentation is distributed electronically and employees are requested 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 must be undertaken by the researcher and not the employer.
4. In areas such as profiling or demographic questions which could raise concerns about the identification of individuals, researchers should ensure that

participants are given to option not to provide this information by *using don't know* or *prefer not to say* where appropriate.

5. The use of passive data collection, for example via cookies or digital fingerprinting, must be clearly explained to participants at the outset of the interview, in order to obtain their informed consent. A brief description of the technique used, what information it gathers and how that data will be used must be provided.
6. Researchers should carefully consider the necessity of storing information such as cookies on a participant's terminal. Such trace data may be used by the employer or others to identify which employees participate in a research project, violating assurances of anonymity. Researchers should consider informing participants how to delete the relevant data, or employ other methods that do not require the placing of such data.

See **MRS Guidelines for Online Research** for further advice in this area

5: Reporting the Results

The Rules

26. Members must ensure that the anonymity of participants is preserved unless participants have given their informed consent for their details to be revealed or for attributable comments to be passed on.

27. Members must take reasonable steps to ensure that anonymisation is effective, with reference to developments in technology and to the data environment into which data are released.

Comment: This rule applies to anonymisation undertaken by members and to anonymisation of data sets undertaken by clients prior to analysis by members. Members are referred to the ICO's Anonymisation Code of Practice.

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- *where data can be matched with publicly available information (such as social media profiles); or***
- *where data can be matched with other sources (such as transaction histories held by clients).***

Guidance

1. The client 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 identity be revealed.
2. In accordance with rule 26, 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 outputs 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 Guidelines for Questionnaire Design* 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, unless specific permission has been obtained. 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.

Notes



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