Sources of Insight

An Overview of Research Sources

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Introduction

Insight requires information/data
Data comes in two basic forms: qualitative and quantitative.
Quantitative data seeks to measure things numerically, asking questions such as "how many?" and "how often?", and consequently tends to require large sample sizes (in the hundreds, or thousands). It also requires everybody to be asked a consistent set of questions, so that we take a measurement on every question, for everybody sampled. To do this, we use a pre-determined questionnaire, which can accommodate some variation depending on particular answers, but basically requires everybody to be asked the same questions. Quantitative data is collected through sample surveys and censuses, and processed on databases.

Qualitative data seeks to understand, asking questions such as "why?" and "how?" It does not require large sample sizes, as it does not claim to be statistically representative. More flexibility can be allowed in the questions asked, using a list of topics for discussion, rather than a fixed set of questions. The most common forms of qualitative data collection are focus groups, death interviews, and variations around these themes, but it can also include observation of behaviour and lifestyle.

Most data is primarily quantitative or qualitative, though each "borrows" from the other. For example, in quantitative surveys there will often be open-ended questions, allowing the respondent to reply in their own words rather than the more common close questions (i.e. "tick boxes"). Qualitative research can accommodate a degree of measurement, usually to help with analysis, e.g. "overall, would you say your experience was positive, negative or neutral?" However we need to be careful, because highly structured questionnaires take people down a pre-determined path, so are not ideal for gathering genuinely qualitative information, and qualitative research involves small numbers of people, so cannot be statistically representative.

Qualitative and quantitative data are complementary. A classic study design would be to conduct qualitative research first, to identify the things that matter to people, and then conduct quantitative research to measure the relative importance and frequency of those things.

There are numerous sources of insight
Insight comes in many forms and these are discussed below. Before embarking on a research project you should ideally scope out what already exists by conducting an insight audit, to prevent money being wasted, and wheels being reinvented. The insight audit should find out what exists in your own organisation, stakeholder organisations, government and national institutions and academic publications.

Primary and secondary data
Primary data is information collected specifically for the purpose of your investigations, i.e. research that you conduct or you commission, for that very purpose.
Secondary data (sometimes called "desk research") is information that you obtain to contribute your investigations, but which was originally gathered for another purpose, e.g. national government surveys, research reports on the internet, research "borrowed" from other organisations.

It obviously tends to be cheaper and quicker to get hold of secondary data. However, frustratingly, you will often find that what you need is not available. Perhaps nobody has done such a study, maybe they have not published it, or if something is available it can be out of date, focused on a different population, asking slightly different questions than you would ideally like. Consequently it is often necessary to commission or conduct primary data collection, generally costing more and taking longer to obtain, but more focused on your specific needs and circumstances.

Characteristics of main sources of insight

Frontline staff
Frontline staff accumulate enormous knowledge, which can be an extremely valuable source of insight, available with relatively little effort, budget and timescale.
Experienced frontline staff understand the minority and exceptional cases, which can sometimes be missed in customer research, e.g. rare circumstances affecting 1% or 2% of customers can have major delivery implications, but a qualitative study or sample survey (e.g. one in every 100 customers sampled) might well miss these people/cases completely.

Focusing on frontline staff is not an alternative to customer research, but a supplement, and very useful for scoping the project, e.g. for identifying the types of customers that need to be included in the research design, and the types of issues to be covered. Obviously frontline staff can tell you little about non-customers!

You might be able to add some questions about customer service to an ongoing staff survey, but is likely that qualitative techniques will be more fruitful with front-line staff. Why not simply spend time sitting with them, observing customer interactions, and talking to staff and customers about the experience.

Management information
You will probably already be aware of what exists in your organisation. It rarely answers all the questions, and tends to focus on factual/behavioural issues, rather than attitudes. It can provide a framework for designing primary studies, e.g. identifying the groups of interest, indicating the questions you need to ask (e.g. filling in the gaps in the database, etc).

Beware of taking management information at face value. Issues of compliance (who provides it, consistency, confusion around exactly what should be entered, etc) need to be considered. Often you will find yourself using a management information database for a slightly different purpose than the one for which it was designed, and this can be at best frustrating, and sometimes produce misleading conclusions.

Surveys
By "surveys" we mean questionnaire based quantitative methods, based on representative samples. Data for these can be collected in different ways, and each of these is discussed in more detail below.

- Face-to-face
  - In street
  - In the home
  - On-site/at a service point
- Telephone
  - General public
  - Target from database
- Self completion
  - Postal
  - Web
  - On-site/at a service point

Beware of mixing these methods (e.g. comparing findings from a street survey with findings from a telephone survey) as they will tend to yield slightly different findings, due to fieldwork factors, sampling differences and interview context.

To do a survey properly, you will often need to contract out work to a specialist market research company. Market research companies have different capabilities and specialisms. Some companies will offer (or may only do) **"fieldwork only"**, requiring the client to do all sampling, questionnaire design, data processing, analysis and reporting; Some will offer **"field & tab"** services, meaning that they will do fieldwork & data processing, but leaving the client to do the rest; **"full service"** companies will be able to undertake all stages of the research process.

Of course price and value for money will be important issues in the procurement process. You will need to draw up a project specification in order to brief the tendering companies. This should include a brief description of the background and objectives, the timetable and your research design requirements. It is perfectly legitimate for you to invite the tendering companies to recommend a costed research design for you to consider, but either way, be aware that the following factors are big influences on the cost:

- length of interview
- "penetration" of target population (i.e. 10%, 50% or 100% of people eligible to take part?)
- method of sample selection - quota (relatively cheap if simple, but complex "interlocking quotas" will add to cost), or random (expensive if applied properly)
- number of people to be interviewed
- method of data collection
- the range of services you require, i.e. just fieldwork only, maybe data processing, possibly questionnaire design and report writing also

Always try to have a pilot survey initially, to test the effectiveness of the questionnaire - this always produces improvements. Try to attend some pilot interviews, to see for yourself.

Face-to-face fieldwork in the street
This is generally a cheap option, and can be done for as little as a few thousand pounds for a simple project, e.g. short questionnaire, with everybody eligible, simple quotas, and a small sample size. It is effective if you have a short questionnaire and want to interview lots of people. If your target population is "visible" (e.g. older people, parents with young children, etc) it is an efficient way to target them. "Screening" questionnaires can be used to identify less visible target populations, perhaps inviting them to do a follow up questionnaire, and obtaining contact details (e.g. posted out or telephoned later to those identified as being in the target group).

However this method has some significant limitations. It is only efficient in very busy locations, such as major shopping centres, and not everybody is equally likely to be present in such locations. If privately owned (e.g. shopping malls) there may be access/security issues. Street interviews are not appropriate for longer questionnaires or questions on sensitive matters.

Face-to-face fieldwork in the home
These are relatively expensive to conduct, costing tens of thousands of pounds upwards. Large sample sizes, long interviews, minority penetration and random sampling could push costs into six figures.

Nevertheless in home surveys are generally considered to be the highest quality form of data collection in most circumstances, and consequently major government surveys are normally conducted this way. Geodemographics can be used to ensure that the streets sampled will collectively produce a highly representative sample. The comfort and privacy of the home allows for longer questionnaires, and for more sensitive subjects to be asked. Many large survey companies now use computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) , whereby an interviewer conducts the interview using a laptop with the questionnaire programmed into it. For more sensitive questions the interviewee can input their responses directly into the laptop.

Face-to-face fieldwork on-site/at a service point
Similar to in street surveys, and can be relatively cheap if the survey design is simple. In some cases this will be the only way of identifying and contacting your target population.

However this method does have some limitations. In order to be efficient, you will need a high level of "traffic" through the location, otherwise the interviewer will be waiting for long periods between interviews. The interviewer will only be able to manage a certain number of interviews in a given period, and this will tend to lead to over representation of customers visiting at quiet times, and under representation of customers visiting at busy times. You will need to consider increasing the number of interviewers at busy times and/or weighting the data to reflect the true proportion of customers in each period.

The location may not provide adequate privacy for people when answering a questionnaire, and indeed there may be logistical problems, particularly if there is insufficient space.

A waiting room may be a very good environment in which to invite people to do a survey, as they are sitting around with little to do. However, is it appropriate for them to complete the questionnaire before their appointment? Most people want to get away quickly after the appointment. If you want their views post-appointment, one option is to get permission for a re-contact survey, i.e. while they are waiting, invite them to participate, obtain their contact details, and tell them that you will contact them shortly afterwards (e.g. by telephone, post, e-mail) to complete a questionnaire.

Negotiating permission to conduct research at the service point can be time consuming and difficult, and particularly in the NHS there are potentially significant ethical considerations which need to be checked with the relevant Medical Research Ethics Committee.

Telephone surveys: screening the population
By this we mean identifying a particular group of people from the wider population. This will be necessary if there is no alternative means of identifying them. Telephone contact is a fast and relatively cheap way to make contact with minorities that cannot be identified in a more efficient way - the cost will depend on the penetration of the group within the wider population (are they 2%, 10%, 50% etc) and the number of people you need to identify. In this respect, it is probably not as representative as face-to-face in home screening (but much cheaper), but more representative than postal screening (though probably more expensive).

Methods such as Random Digit Dialling can screen a representative sample of households with landlines in a given area, but "mobile only" households are more problematic, as mobile numbers cannot be linked to place of residence. That this is potentially a relevant limitation, as specific populations are known to be more likely to live in "mobile only" households, i.e. the very poor and the young/very mobile.

Note that research is exempt from the Telephone Preference Service scheme, in which people can prevent tele-marketing to their telephone numbers.

Telephone surveys: working from lists/databases
A very common use of telephone surveys is with people for whom telephone contact details are available, e.g. customers. This produces quick and cost-effective research. It can be very convenient for the respondent, enabling appointments to be scheduled appropriately, and the matching of respondent and interviewer on the basis of specific community languages.

However you will need to make sure that the research process is compliant with the Data Protection Act. The database used needs to be registered for research purposes, and there needs to be clarity over which organisation (client or contractor) is acting as the Data Controller. Make sure that you consult the appropriate Data Protection expert in your own organisation, and if necessary consult the Market Research Society for guidance.

Self completion surveys
The absence of an interviewer makes these surveys cheaper, but as a consequence, there can be problems with low response rate and poor data quality (i.e. not completed properly/thoroughly). Electronic data collection, as on web surveys, will tend to produce better data quality than paper questionnaires.

Some types of questions do not produce reliable answers, e.g. people cannot allocate their own social class reliably, you cannot ask about awareness reliably as you do not know if respondent has had help from others in deciding answers.

Obviously a good degree of literacy is needed in order to do a self completion survey.

On the positive side, in addition to lower cost, there may be occasions on which it is preferable for people to complete the questionnaire on their own (e.g. very sensitive issues), and with time available to break off and check information (e.g. financial or medical history).

Self completion surveys: postal
These are relatively cheap, possibly costing just a few thousand pounds for a short questionnaire to be printed, mailed (with business reply envelopes) to a small sample, and the data to be entered and processed.

Response rates will generally be lower than for most face-to-face surveys, and most telephone surveys. Very low response rates can cast doubts on representativeness. Sending reminders to non-responders will incrementally improve response rate, but generally speaking, 30% replying would be very good. Higher can be achieved with very motivated groups, e.g. perhaps a survey about a treatment that people have recently received.

Self completion surveys: internet

Internet data collection is very cheap, hence its rapidly growing popularity. Software is available to enable surveys to be conducted online, at virtually no cost.

However there are doubts about the representativeness and inclusiveness of Internet-based samples. Many national opinion polls and consumer surveys use panels of people who are paid to respond to surveys. These are unlikely to have sufficient numbers of people in a given area to be useful to the health sector, except perhaps for very large regions.

The so-called "digital divide" means that poorer people and older people are much less likely to be willing and able to participate in internet-based research. Even among those with access to internet, frequency and nature of usage varies widely.

Self completion surveys: at a service point

This could be in various contexts, with questionnaires handed out to relevant people, for example in a waiting room. The questionnaires need to be distributed systematically, as simply leaving them on a table will generally result in an extremely low response rate, even if accompanied by posters or other publicity. It might be possible for this to be done by staff already present (e.g. receptionist), but they may feel they are too busy to deal with the associated queries. If distribution is not systematic, biases will creep in, e.g. if more are given out when the receptionist is quiet and has have time, then the participating customers will be biased towards those visiting at quiet times, and possibly having a different experience from those visiting at busy times.

People have plenty of time while they are waiting, but you may want them to tell you about their appointment, which they cannot do while waiting for it! After the appointment, most people want to get away, rather than complete a questionnaire. Questionnaires taken away for later completion tend to have very low response rates, i.e. most people fail to complete and return afterwards.

If you do use this method and find that it yields a very low response rate, the data is best regarded as informal feedback, rather than serious research.

Customer satisfaction surveys

Customer satisfaction is a difficult concept to measure any meaningful sense, and the absolute figures are best regarded as indications, rather than precise quantities. Nevertheless, regular measurement can produce very valuable data, showing trends in customer perceptions (i.e. getting better/getting worse), which will help you to understand whether your policies are working.

Such trend analysis requires consistent and robust methods, so these surveys need thinking through and planning. Questions for the planning stage include:

- Defining customers - not always straightforward, e.g. for a school, is it the parent or the child?
- Sampling “customers” or “customer interactions”? - should a customer who visits once a year have the same chance of selection/same weight as a customer who visits several times a month?
- Which questions to ask?   - the concept of " overall satisfaction" is rooted in various aspects of the service. Which aspects do you need to ask about, and which contextual factors will be important in explaining different perceptions?
- Need to stick with the questions you start with - changing the questions over time will tend to undermine the reliability of the trends.
- How many customers do I need to interview? - the larger the number of survey respondents, the more robust will be your findings (assuming appropriate sampling techniques are used), but of course, larger numbers mean greater cost.
- Which data collection method to use? - different methods have different strengths, and some groups will tend to be under represented by some methods.
- How do I make sense of the results? - there are many different ways of using findings are than important than others (e.g. overall satisfaction), or you may focus on a "basket" of several important variables. Another approach is to take the "basket" and average individual variables into a "composite" figure, perhaps differentially weighted to reflect the fact that some variables are more important than others.
- Producing actionable results - factors "driving" customer satisfaction are not always evident in simple analysis, and you will need to consider applying more sophisticated statistical techniques, such as regression/key driver analysis.

Qualitative methods

In the sections below we describe some of the more common qualitative methods.

The qualitative research process tends to have a number of key stages which you need to consider when planning, and writing specifications for procurement.

- Sample definition (target population, and numbers of interviews/groups within each category -"purposive" sampling should be used, focusing on groups of interest regardless of their numerical size, as qualitative research is not trying to be statistically representative)
- Develop the discussion guides and any associated material (e.g. information to read before or during the fieldwork, creative material designed to stimulate discussion)
- Recruitment of participants (getting the right mix of people to participate)
- Conducting the fieldwork
- Recording the data (ideally tape-recording discussions and then transcribing tapes)
- Analysing the data (constructing an appropriate framework through which to make sense of the large amount of information obtained)
- Reporting

Moderating (or facilitating) the fieldwork is a specialist skill, and is certainly not an easy job. The Moderator needs to manage the group/interview effectively so that key issues are discussed within the timescale, difficult/sensitive issues are "teased out", all participants contribute, no individual dominates (in groups), disagreements and misconceptions are managed in a way that stimulates discussion/enhances learning etc.

You need to think about how to recruit participants. It may be that you can recruit through existing networks, such as community groups or customer lists, but of course these participants may know each other, and the fact that they engage with the group/service may mean that they are atypically well informed/more engaged with the services being researched. Market research companies can be commissioned to deliver all aspects of the project for you, or alternatively, there are specialist qualitative recruitment companies that can be contracted only to recruit participants and manage the logistics (venue, refreshments, paying incentives if applicable), leaving you to undertake the professional research tasks, such as discussion guide development, moderation, analysis and reporting. Note that you should not underestimate the amount of work involved in these stages, and failure to appreciate what is involved between the fieldwork and reporting stages is a common pitfall of many "DIY" research projects.

It is good practice to attend some groups/interviews, ideally early in the project. You should attend as an observer, and your role should be made clear to respondents. You should sit quietly in the background, but if there are several observers this can be offputting, and inhibit discussion. Viewing studios, with two-way mirrors, should be used in such cases.

Focus groups

Standard focus groups contain 7-10 people in an informal setting, with a duration of around 90 minutes. If commissioned commercially, they will cost between £1500 and £3000 per group, with the relative difficulty of recruiting the target sample being a major factor in the cost, i.e. how easy/difficult they are to find, and whether a large financial incentive is required to get people to attend.

They are best used in situations where you want people to debate ideas and options. They are much less suitable for exploring very personal and sensitive information, in-depth analysis of personal circumstances, personal decisions etc. Clearly they are not practical if the potential participants are geographically distant from each other, have very limited time availability, or will not be open and honest in a group situation - these scenarios often apply with very specific professional communities (e.g. business or "political" competitors).

Focus groups tend to be most productive if the group is relatively homogenous (e.g. similar age/lifestage, similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds), because people feel less inhibitions about expressing themselves among "people like me". Another reason for having a degree of homogeneity is that there will be relevant issues in common, for the group to talk about. A group which has little shared experience is likely to be quite unproductive in generating insight.

Therefore, to ensure that diversity is represented, you will need to have multiple groups, e.g. single/pre-children young adults, middle-aged with children, middle-aged without children, those around retirement age, and older people. Within each category you should ideally have at least two groups, because single groups can be "maverick" (i.e. having an atypical composition, or perhaps dominated by one or two outspoken individuals).

Individual depth interviews
These interviews vary in length, depending on the number of issues for discussion, and the time available (e.g. high-level professionals may only have half an hour, but longer is available with "ordinary people/ordinary customers"). Most would be in the range of 30-60 minutes.

Individual depth interviews will tend to cost between £400 and £1000 each when commercially procured, with cost influenced by the same factors applying to focus groups.

The focus on one individual makes this approach most appropriate for sensitive issues and in-depth investigation. The absence of other participants to debate with means that it is not generally the best approach for exploring ideas and options.

Variations on focus groups and individual depth interviews
Mini groups - comprising perhaps 3-6 participants and used where it is difficult to recruit a full group, and/or where you require a group setting for the debate aspect, but you also need time for in-depth investigation of some issues. This is a more intimate environment than a full focus group and can be used on slightly more sensitive issues, as long as the participants feel comfortable with the setting, e.g. possibly patients who have the same condition.

Paired interviews - similar to individual in depth interviews, but used where you want to understand the shared experience between related individuals, such as parent and child, husband and wife, carer and "cared for". Often used to examine how joint decisions are made.

Reconvened groups/interviews - this describes a series of groups/interviews conducted over time, in which the same people meet again. Can be used to explore a common "journey" over time, or to explore highly complex issues, examining how opinions develop as the participants become more knowledgeable through briefings and debates.

Ethnographic research - this method combines data collection through interviews, with data collection through observation. The researcher will often "immerse" themselves in the life of the participant, spending time with them/ sharing their life, to obtain a more holistic understanding than can be achieved through a verbal interview.

Customer journey mapping
This technique normally uses an individual depth interview to talk through the customer experience across a process/over time, exploring both logical and emotional thinking. It identifies key moments on the journey, particularly around "touchpoints" with the service, and tries to understand which factors have the most influence on the overall experience.

It is a qualitative technique but can accommodate some limited quantitative data. For example, participants can be asked to rate a particular service interaction on a scale of -10 to +10, to provide a numerical description of their experience.

When designing a discussion guide for a customer journey mapping project, remember that the journey does not necessarily begin and end in a way defined by the service provided. It may be necessary, for example, to explore the way in which the person came to realise that they needed/wanted the service, to understand the customer's situation and feelings when they entered "the service process".

Mystery shopping
With this technique the researcher "pretends" to be a customer, in order to investigate service quality and compliance with policy. Often used to check “hard facts” such as waiting times, number of rings before answer, etc. Also used to test staff knowledge and effectiveness, e.g. “I am a wheelchair user, please tell me about accessibility?”, or "my mobile phone has this problem, what can I do?".

Mystery shopping requires considerable preparation in terms of questionnaire/checklist development and training of the mystery shoppers to ensure consistent application of the method, and consistent interpretation of the response from the staff.

There are considerable ethical questions round with this technique. Is it reasonable to take up the time of busy staff? Is mystery shopping reasonable to staff, and reasonable to customers waiting in the queue behind the mystery shopper? Consultation with staff and management is necessary before any mystery shopping is undertaken.

The researcher needs to protect the employee from unreasonable scrutiny, e.g. they may fail to give the perfect response, but is this their personal fault, or inadequate training? Research must avoid adverse consequences for anybody participating.

Consultation
“Consultation” is a general term which can encompass all or most of the sources of insight. Traditional methods have included writing to community groups requesting feedback, stimulating debate through the media, having a public meeting, and "soundings" being taken by the senior management.

These days traditional methods are still used, but more sophisticated methods are also available. The website peopleandparticipation.net lists 50+ different methods of consultation. The appropriate method depends on the consultation question, the range of stakeholders, the diversity of stakeholder groups, level of public interest, and of course the time and budget available. For a major consultation (e.g. hospital closure) you would need a multifaceted approach, but for smaller issues it may be sufficient to simply talk informally to relevant stakeholders.

In designing a consultation you need to think about the relevant stakeholders. Some will be well organised and experienced in making their views known. Others will need you to take proactive measures and make it easy for them to articulate their opinions. You will need to think about whether to use relatively unstructured questions (e.g. "tell us what you think about our service?") or a more structured approach (e.g. "please answer these five questions").

Organisations that can help you conduct your consultation include:
- Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)
- Local Involvement Network (LINk)
- Local Authority residents panel (if one exists)

Deliberative methods
Deliberative methods of various kinds recognize that the public are important stakeholders, but that they do not always have the knowledge to provide a really informed solution. In contrast professionals may have the technical knowledge, but do not always understand the public/customer experience.

Deliberation seeks to enable public and professional stakeholders (including the general public) to help find solutions and shape policy, through debate and balanced briefings to provide information and enhance understanding, then exploring opinions, preferences etc that emerge.

There are many different deliberative techniques, but some of the more commonly used approaches in the UK include:
- Deliberative Mapping: experts & public work together to rate options, in relation to defined objectives
  - Helps both to understand each others perspectives
- Deliberative Workshops: discussion over several hours/days, mixed with balanced briefings
  - Tries to develop a solution to a complex problem
- Citizen's Juries: as workshops, but using jury format
- Citizens summit: as workshops but on a much larger scale, using technology to aid facilitation (e.g. video linking different locations, electronic voting on options, etc)

Process evaluation

Process evaluations will typically examine available data and documentation, such as service statistics (e.g. capacity and volumes through the business), policy procedures (i.e. how things are intended to work), and relevant correspondence such as minutes of meetings. It describes what the service provides, to whom, and by what methods. It will assess these things in relation to specified objectives (e.g. service goals, mission statement etc), in as far as the methodology will allow.

This is predominantly a method which analyses secondary data, but it can be supplemented by interviews. Without such supplementary data it can tend to omit important attitudinal/emotional/cultural factors, which can be very important in shaping real life experience and outcomes. In summary, process evaluations can provide a very important dimension, but on their own have significant limitations in terms of uncovering customer insight.

Usability testing

Originally developed to aid product development in the technology industry, usability testing assesses the effectiveness of products/systems by observing and questioning "real people" within a controlled setting. It is nowadays very often used to evaluate the usability of websites, software and hardware. It seeks to identify problems, inefficiencies and misunderstandings in order that they can be addressed in the product development process. This is done by a researcher sitting with a "real person" as they use (or try to use) the system in question.

Because it is quite an intensive and time-consuming process, it tends to be practical only with small numbers of testers. Given the small numbers of testers, the artificial controlled environment and the short duration of the test, usability testing cannot be expected to identify all of the shortcomings in a system, but it can identify the most common and enable these problems to be tackled before full implementation takes place, thereby improving the customer experience and reducing costs associated with system failure.

When a fast response is needed

Obviously secondary data is potentially available very quickly, if it can be found in the right format, focus etc, and a simple internet search can yield huge amounts of data, particularly from sites such as the Office for National Statistics.

Here we consider primary sources that are available, if your research questions cannot be answered by existing data.

Small-scale qualitative research (typically focus groups or individual depth interviews) can be conducted and reported on in just a few weeks, assuming that the population/sample definition is fairly simple, and the level of analysis required is not too complex.

Commercial Omnibus surveys interview a nationally representative sample, every week, but they cover the whole country and only a tiny number of respondents may live in your area, unless your area is national or a very large region. They are called "Omnibus" surveys because a number of different clients share the cost of the survey, by purchasing on a "per question" basis. Consequently Omnibus surveys can be very cost effective if you have a fairly small number of questions, but less cost-effective as the number of questions goes beyond 10 or 15 minutes of interviewing. If you already have your questions ready to go onto the questionnaire, commercial Omnibus surveys can provide your results in less than a week with telephone or online surveys, or two to six weeks for a face-to-face survey (depending on the sampling rigour applied to the survey i.e quota sampling or more rigourous random sampling)

Panels containing people who have agreed in advance to participate in research, e.g. local authority residents panels, can be set up in such a way as to enable very quick collection of data. Of course the setting up of the panel in the first place requires significant time, but once in place they can facilitate quick turnaround projects. Commercial companies now often use "Pulse Panels" (often online, sometimes featuring "expert consumers") to get fast and cheap responses about their products and services. However, beware of two common problems with many panels. Firstly, that some demographic groups (e.g. young adults) are difficult to recruit to the panel, and tend to have low response rates even when they join. Secondly, being a panel member for a significant time can lead to "panel conditioning", in which participation in panel projects makes the individual atypical of the wider population (e.g. more knowledgeable, more engaged in public service issues). For these reasons, one should be cautious of the extent to which the panel accurately represents "public opinion".

However, when thinking about fast response data collection, don't forget that the "front end" and "back-end" elements of the project can take a considerable amount of time. For example, agreeing the definition of your research question, the development of research instruments (questionnaires, discussion guides, etc), and analysing the results can take a lot longer than you might think, particularly if colleagues / stakeholders need to be consulted.

Research ethics

The NHS as a system of committees responsible for ensuring that research is conducted to high ethical standards. Trusts will normally have their own research ethics committee, operating under the guidance of the National Research Ethics Service, about which information can be obtained on the following website:

- http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/

Your Strategic Health Authority should be able to provide you with information and contact details for your local research ethics committee.

In principle research ethics committee approval is required for any research in which people are selected/sample because they are a patient, or have been a patient in the past. However, local application of this rule varies, and if the research is focused on customer experience rather than medical matters, the local advice may be that the project does not require ethics approval.

Please be aware that the implications of ethics committee approval, and the conditions that they may apply to your project, can be very considerable in terms of workload, timescale and budget.

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