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Beyond the Single Organization: Inside Insights from Gaining Access for Large Multi-Organization Survey HRD Research

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Abstract

Gaining physical access to potential respondents is crucial to human resource development (HRD) survey research. Yet a review of the HRD, human resource management and bestselling business and management research methods texts in the USA and UK reveals that, even where the process of gaining access is discussed and its cruciality stressed, inside accounts and insights regarding the daunting and problematic nature and its impact upon data collected are rarely emphasized. More specialist methods literature, although outlining some potential issues, again offers few insights into the actual realities likely to be faced in the real world. Consideration of recent articles in HRD journals highlights also that, despite the widespread use of surveys, often via the Internet, such issues of physical access are rarely mentioned, reporting at best merely summarizing from whom and how data were obtained. We speak to this problem by offering two inside accounts of multi-organization research studies utilizing a survey strategy and Internet questionnaire, where gaining access to people across a large number of organizations threw up many challenges. These accounts offer clear insights into the issues and implications for rigor associated with gaining access when undertaking Internet surveys using both purchased lists (databases) and volunteer panels. In particular, they highlight the importance of recognizing that gaining access is often problematic, and provide a context for our recommendations for research practice, thereby assisting the mitigation of potential problems.

Keywords

Gaining access, physical access, cognitive access, access, online survey, Internet survey, web survey, survey, questionnaire, response rate, inside account

Beyond the Single Organization: Inside Insights from Gaining Access for Large Multi-Organization Survey HRD Research

Methods textbooks in business and management, human resource development (HRD), and more specifically research papers in HRD, usually report empirical research as a logical, smooth progression from planning, design, and implementation through to data analysis. Yet, although in reality, the norm is far from these brief rationalized accounts of the research process, ‘inside accounts’ (Bryman, 2013, p. 1) and reports or insights (Townsend & Burgess, 2009) of the realities of organizational research are rare throughout the social sciences. In this paper, we focus on such insights regarding an often-overlooked part of survey research that, despite receiving scant attention in the literature, is crucial to much HRD research: gaining physical access to potential respondents in multiple organizations. It is comparatively easy to obtain a list of potential respondents from a single organization and distribute a questionnaire to them to collect data (Anderson, 2013; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2016). However, gaining such physical access to potential respondents becomes far more difficult for multiple organizations where such lists are often either unavailable or difficult to obtain, as well as of variable quality. Notwithstanding subsequent issues of potential sample bias and low or declining response rates (Dillman, Smyth & Christian, 2014; Toepoel, 2016), existing textbooks (for example: Anderson, 2013; Swanson & Holton, 1997) and research papers (for example: Fontana, Milligan, Littlejohn, & Margaryan, 2015; Liu, 2015) offer limited insights or advice regarding the realities of gaining such access to potential respondents.

For HRD researchers undertaking survey research using questionnaires, a sound understanding of the issues associated with gaining physical access to potential respondents is crucial, enabling sufficient responses to reduce the risk of non-response bias and helping ensure the sample is representative; this being an essential component of rigor (Groves & Peytcheva, 2008). Specialized survey method texts and associated research papers, highlight the increasing popularity of Internet based questionnaires (Dillman et al., 2014; Saunders 2012), noting difficulty in accessing suitable potential respondents. In particular, they comment that even where lists of email addresses or online panels of potential respondents are available, response rates are often low and quality variable (Toepoel, 2016), indicating potential sources of sample composition bias. These include potential respondents’ access to the Internet, willingness to participate in the survey, and willingness to participate in the panel (Bosnjak et al., 2013). Yet, despite issues of access being considered (albeit in varying levels of detail) by the majority of HRD, HRM, and general business and management research methods textbooks, their focus is on research in a single organization and in particular building cognitive access to potential respondents; that is enhancing their willingness to participate to help ensure as high a response rate as possible. Alongside this, challenges associated with gaining physical access are at best reported briefly by HRD researchers in journal articles, with little or no indication being given of the difficulties faced or how they were addressed. Such paucity of advice and limited reporting regarding the realities of gaining access to potential respondents across multiple organizations detracts from HRD researchers’ ability to ensure and assess methodological rigor in research design, researchers (particularly novices) being ill prepared to deal with the associated challenges.

Our aim in this paper is to address the paucity of advice and decurtate reporting regarding the challenges of gaining physical access to potential respondents for large multi-organization surveys. We commence by providing an overview of the issues highlighted and advice offered by the most widely purchased HRD, HRM and business and management research methods texts. Within this, we highlight a lack of inside accounts and critique the

simplified representation of the process. Next, we reveal the extent to which meaningful accounts of physical access to potential respondents have been provided in relation to survey research in recent HRD journal articles, distilling the few potential issues that have been highlighted. Having noted the existing paucity of information and insights, we offer two inside accounts of gaining physical access drawn from applied research projects utilizing Internet surveys of Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs). We summarize our resultant insights as nine recommendations for research practice, prior to drawing conclusions regarding the potential implications for HRD researchers.

Gaining Access -Advice from Research Methods Textbooks

In this section we examine the advice offered by the most widely purchased HRD, HRM and business and management research methods texts regarding gaining access. We set out our method of locating such texts. Our subsequent analysis is based on these texts.

Method

To locate research methods textbooks within HRD, HRM and business and management, we searched the online retailer Amazon for ‘research’ books within ‘business, finance and law’ (amazon.co.uk) and within ‘business and money’ (amazon.com), sorting by relevance. This revealed over 72,000 texts for amazon.co.uk and 68,000 for amazon.com, the top 1,000 of which were then scanned to identify those purporting to cover HRD or HRM research specifically, or management, business or organizational research in general. In doing this we excluded discipline-specific texts such as Veal and Burton (2014) for arts and event management, those focusing upon specific methods or strategies such as Coghlan and Brannick (2014) on action research, texts with a wider intended readership such as Bell and Waters (2014: 1) “guide for first time researchers... regardless of discipline” and those whose focus goes beyond business and management settings such as Gray’s (2014) *Doing Research in the Real World*. Using Amazon’s sales rankings as an indicator of how well each was selling overall, we selected those books which were ranked on either site as within the top 1,000,000 sellers for HRD and HRM, and top 100,000 sellers for general business and management, research methods. This resulted in four HRD/HRM and eight general business and management research methods texts (Table 1), excluding earlier editions still in print. Our subsequent analysis relates to these texts.

Findings

Initial consideration of the indexes of these 12 best-selling texts reveals that, although access appears as an entry in only one HRD/HRM text (Anderson, 2013), it is indexed in all but three business and management texts. Across these texts, the depth in which access is considered varies markedly from a single page (Blumberg, Cooper, & Schindler, 2014) to 18 pages (Saunders et al., 2016), one (Brewerton & Millward, 2001) devoting a full eight-page chapter. For those texts that have an index entry for ‘access’, following an overview, readers are presented with discussions that focus primarily on research in a single organization (Table 2). A number of these (in particular, Brewerton & Millward, 2001; Saunders et al. 2016) distinguish explicitly between obtaining physical access to (reach) potential respondents in an organization or organizations and, following receipt of the questionnaire, the subsequent gaining of cognitive access represented by their decision to participate in the data collection process. However, although in the majority of sources this distinction is not highlighted, the role of a gatekeeper and her/his power to enable or block (physical) access to research participants in a single organization, is usually mentioned. Those texts that devote more space to gaining of physical access often emphasize the politics associated with the process (for

example, Bryman & Bell, 2015) and the need to get buy-in across the organization (Brewerton & Millward, 2001; Saunders et al., 2016). Gaining such access is argued to be a process that should not be taken lightly and will involve a combination of planning, hard work and luck (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Consideration of the researcher's role in relation to the organization, where discussed, focuses on whether s/he is an outsider or an insider (Saunders et al., 2016); the latter often being linked to employees doing action research in their own organizations and, implicitly, the use of their personal network (for example, Anderson, 2013). Strategies or tips to help gain physical access are either mentioned or discussed by all but two of the texts, focus being on the granting of access to collect data from a single organization. Within the discussion there is an (often implicit) assumption that data will be collected using techniques such as interviews or observation rather than using a questionnaire as part of a survey strategy. Of the six texts that include case studies or detailed boxed examples focusing upon access, only three consider access to multiple organizations, this often being in less detail than those provided for single organization access. Further consideration of the texts reveals that, where access to multiple organizations is considered elsewhere, the actual granting of physical access is usually implicit, being part of a survey strategy utilizing questionnaires and the need to ensure a high response rate.

Analysis of issues associated with access when using questionnaires across these texts again highlights a focus on cognitive rather than physical access (Table 3). While the majority outline ways of distributing questionnaires, there is limited discussion of how to obtain a list of potential respondents, establish the utility of that list and ensure the questionnaire reaches intended respondents. Despite recognizing the use of questionnaires for research across multiple organizations, gaining physical and cognitive access are normally considered only as part of wider case studies and boxed examples (Table 3). Notable exceptions to this in business and management texts are Blumberg et al. (2014) who consider physical access as part of sampling through running cases, and Saunders et al. (2016) who provide boxed examples illustrating different aspects of cognitive access. However, even in these texts little insight is provided regarding using questionnaires -whether Internet, mail, or interviewer completed- to multiple organizations, and the realities that researchers are likely to face when using third party compiled lists or panel data. Whilst we note that within HRD specialist volumes such as Saunders and Tosey's (2015) edited handbook offer some insights into gaining access to undertake surveys, the emphasis remains on respondents drawn from within a single organization (Akinçi & Saunders, 2015; Stewart & Harte, 2015) and gaining cognitive access. A notable exception is Sheehan, Saunders and Wang's (2015) exploration of issues of physical and cognitive access to potential respondents across a large number of organizations drawn from a commercially available database, albeit when using interviewer completed telephone questionnaires. However, other than this, we have found no text within the HRD or HRM domains that considers specifically the realities or offers insights regarding gaining physical access for large-scale multi-organization survey research. For this reason, we now review recent journal articles in HRD for possible insights.

Gaining Physical Access in HRD Survey Research

In this section we examine the extent of reporting of access for HRD survey research. First we set out our search criteria. Following this we outline our analysis based on these sources.

Method

To ascertain the current extent of reporting of access for HRD survey research a pragmatic decision was taken to consult all such articles published in 2015 in five journals

used widely by HRD researchers. These comprised *European Journal of Training and Development*, *Human Resource Development International*, *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, *International Journal of Training and Development* and *Management Learning*. As we were only interested in empirical articles that used primary data, journals such as *Human Resource Development Review* were excluded. Of the 169 articles in these five volumes, 29 (17%) used a survey strategy to collect at least part of their primary data. Of these 14 (48%) state explicitly they use Internet questionnaires, six (21%) that they use paper or interviewer completed, and nine (31%) do not state the precise type of questionnaire used (Table 4). Twenty-one (72%) studies use data that were collected from respondents across two or more organizations, respondents for the remaining eight (28%) studies being drawn from single organizations. Detail in the reporting varies considerably between these 29 studies.

Findings

All 29 studies offer no more than a brief overview of the source of their respondents, 27 reporting the number of respondents, and 22 recording either the size of the population from which they were selected or the response rate. Respondents in the eight studies using a single organization comprise either that organization's employees or, for the remaining two studies, a compiled list (of university students) from a third-party organization (see Table 5). Reporting of single study organization's employees comprises part of the description of sample characteristics such as "The sample comprised employees working in Gujarat Urja Vikas Nigam Ltd., Gujarat, India. The number of sample respondents selected for the study was 150" (Muduli, 2015, p. 246), or "...an Italian branch of a large multinational firm in a high-tech industry... of the 140 employees who received the questionnaire, 108 responded" (Capetta & Magni, 2015, p. 115,116). Respondents for the two studies using university students are each selected from those taking specific courses at a university (for example: Khasawuhev & Al-Zawahreh, 2015), although the nature of the researchers' relationship with that organization or a possible gatekeeper is not discussed. All but two of the single organization studies report the number of respondents, although the size of population from which they are selected is mentioned rarely.

For multiple organization studies reviewed, just over half of potential respondents are selected from a list compiled by a third party organization (Table 5), most frequently a training or learning and development provider (for example, Gruicic & Benton, 2015). Other compilers of lists used include business forums (Abbasain & Yazdanfar, 2015), business directories (Liu, 2015), professional bodies/institutes (Fontana et al., 2015) and accreditation organizations (Satori, Tacconi, & Caputo, 2015); although none use online volunteer panels. While no studies emphasize problems associated with the particular compiled list used, issues such as difficulties in obtaining lists of the target population (Choi, Lee & Jacobs, 2015), and partially incorrect or incomplete entries (Liu, 2015) are referred to occasionally. Lists of study organizations' employees are used in seven multiple organization studies (Table 5), these studies each comprising six or fewer organizations. For these studies, very limited detail was provided regarding how access has been gained; for example just reporting data were collected "from the nursing staff of three major public hospitals in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia" (Rasheed, Khan, Rasheed, & Munir, 2015, p.38). All multiple organization studies report the number of respondents and, where practicable, the size of the population from which they are selected or the associated response rate, very little commentary being provided. Lists compiled by the researcher are used for three multiple organization studies (Table 5), being developed from: "multiple publicly available business directories" (Au & Ahmed, 2015, p. 354), professional development bodies serving a specific sector (Fontana et al., 2015) and researchers' contacts and word of mouth (Sutton, Williams,

& Allinson, 2015). As before, associated issues are very rarely discussed, at best receiving a brief comment, for example: “Although the response rate is low, there is no reason to believe that the sample is unrepresentative of the overall population” (Fontana et al., 2015, p. 38).

Like texts, published research in HRD can therefore be seen to provide few insights into the practice of gaining physical access other than indicating a potential issue of low response rates and that obtaining good quality lists may be problematic. Similar to Baruch and Holtom (2008) the studies reviewed reveal a wide range of response rates ranging from 6.6% using a business directory (Liu, 2015), to 85% using five organizations’ lists of employees (Said, Rasdi, Samah, Silong, & Sulaiman, 2015). The studies indicate a range of potential access points in the form of third party providers of databases and example sources of lists of potential respondents. They included training providers, accreditation organizations, business forums, professional bodies, industry bodies and business directories. However, no mention was made of online volunteer panels, despite these being highlighted in the specific literature and offering an alternative approach to recruiting potentially willing respondents (Bosnjak et al., 2013; Toepoel 2016). Given this virtual absence of insights regarding physical access to multiple organizations across both texts and journal articles reviewed, we now offer two inside accounts of the realities of gaining physical access when using Internet questionnaires in survey research.

The Realities of Gaining Physical Access When Using Internet Questionnaires: Two Inside Accounts

Our two inside accounts are taken from our own applied survey research and illustrate the practical difficulties of gaining physical access when using Internet questionnaires emailed to multiple organizations. They comprise two multi-organization questionnaire studies with UK SMEs undertaken for an external client who pre-specified the sample characteristics. Given acknowledged difficulties of accessing SMEs (Curran & Blackburn, 2000) and the wide variations in Web-based survey response rates reported in previous research (Shih & Fan, 2008), our use of such accounts can be argued to offer two typical cases (Saunders, 2012) illustrating difficulties in gaining physical access. Each utilized an Internet questionnaire that, as part of fully funded research, needed to be completed by over 1,000 respondents throughout the UK as part of the contract. The questionnaires were both delivered through widely used online survey tools. Both commenced by providing details about the research and explicitly asking participants if they consented to take part. Where participants did not give their consent, they were thanked but were not able to continue with the questionnaire. Our first account explores gaining physical access using a compiled (database) list of named potential contacts purchased from a reputable data list broker. Our second outlines gaining physical access through an online panel company’s pre-screened volunteer panel, and paid for on a completed questionnaire basis. Together these accounts offer insights into the issues associated with gaining physical access using Internet questionnaires.

Using a Compiled List Purchased from a Third Party Organization

Our first account outlines the use of a compiled list of contact details for named SME owner/managers purchased from a reputable data list broker for research undertaken in 2012 (Gray, Saunders, & Goregaokar, 2012). Assuming a response rate of 10% (the lowest suggested by Baruch & Holtom, 2008) these contact details (comprising name, position in the SME, email address and telephone number) and demographic data were ordered for 10,000 private sector SMEs. Drawing on the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2012) estimates for the number of private sector SMEs, separate quotas were specified for the

number of private sector SMEs in each of the UK's 12 Economic Planning Regions. For each Economic Planning Region quotas were divided into six groups according to the number of employees. The broker provided details for 11,789 SMEs distributed proportionally across our quotas, the total number allowing for contacts that were no longer valid, termed 'hard bounce back'. Within each regional quota, potential contacts were checked prior to emailing the questionnaire to ensure they met our client's pre-specified criteria, namely they were SMEs (having less than 250 employees as defined by European Union recommendation L124/36), were based in the UK and were in the private sector. This resulted in 913 contacts being removed from the sample provided due to their being large enterprises, public sector organizations or a charities.

We distributed the questionnaire to the remaining 10,876 SME contacts by a web link in an email. Some 4,892 emails containing the link to our questionnaire were bounced back almost immediately as the intended recipient was non-contactable. Unfortunately, it was not possible to ascertain the reason from our University's email server. However, the broker argued it was because our emails were being blocked due to content being rejected by the recipient's email server settings, their SPAM filters, their anti-virus software, or for some other reason triggered by the email and hyperlink to the Internet questionnaire. A test by the broker of 91 emails that had 'bounced' revealed only nine were invalid, the broker arguing subsequently that it was not their problem as this proportion was "well within the expected bounce back rate for emails that are invalid".

One month after the launch of the survey, despite two follow-up emails to the full sample, only 508 completed surveys that met the pre-specified inclusion criteria had been returned, a response rate of 8.5 per cent when non-contacts are excluded. Responses confirmed all these respondents comprised the owner, owner/manager, manager or a senior person within the SME and so would be likely to have the knowledge required to answer the questionnaire. However, 508 returns were insufficient for subsequent analyses and commercially unacceptable given the commitment to 1,000 returns made to the client. Four recent graduates were recruited to telephone non-responding SMEs and invite them to complete the questionnaire via the telephone. Unfortunately, potential SME respondents were not particularly willing to answer our questionnaire, and we only began to get responses when interviewers were paid a bonus for each questionnaire completed. Within a week, all interviewers had quit due to the difficulty in obtaining respondents, and we only had a further 70 responses.

Our next approach used existing contacts with Chambers of Commerce, four of who agreed to help, receiving a financial incentive for each fully completed questionnaire returned by their members. The Chambers of Commerce emailed their members using our introductory letter explaining the purpose of the research, inviting them to participate and providing a hyperlink to our questionnaire. This time bounce back was, according to the Chambers of Commerce, negligible. At the same time, we gained support from a range of employer groups with whom we had already developed relationships. Again, comprehensive efforts were made to explain the purpose of the survey to each employer group and how the data provided by their members would be handled with rigorous attention to confidentiality. Once the initial launch had been made with each Chamber of Commerce or employer group, a follow up reminder was issued to encourage the maximum possible response rate. Responses from each Chamber and employer group were recorded and stored separately, eventually resulting in a further 589 responses. Alongside this, direct mailing using selected directories of small businesses (again incentivized) resulted in an additional 349 responses, a further 84 responses being achieved through our existing contacts. Once again, bounce back was negligible.

After a further six weeks 1,600 responses that met the private sector and SME size

criteria had been received. Of these, 1,004 had 80 per cent or more of the questions answered and so can be considered complete responses (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2011). As suggested by Bosnjak et al. (2013) demographic data were used to provide indications of possible bias in sample composition. When compared with Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2012) estimates, our respondents over represented SMEs from certain UK regions (notably London and the South East; Table 6), and certain sectors (notably scientific, professional and technical; Table 7). Wave analysis (Rogelberg and Stanton, 2007), comparing earlier respondents from the purchased list with later respondents from the Chambers of Commerce, highlighted regional differences related to the geographical location of one of the Chambers of Commerce. There was no obvious reason for the latter. Subsequently we controlled for representativeness where necessary.

Using a Volunteer Panel

Our second case uses a volunteer panel of SMEs accessed via a reputable online panel company as part of research conducted in 2015 (Gray, Saunders, & Farrant, 2015), payment being made to the panel company for each fully complete questionnaire that met six criteria we specified. Four of these, specified by our client, comprised the SME size (this time between 5 and 249 employees), being based in the UK, in the private sector, and having been started in 2012 or earlier. Respondents from volunteer panels self-recruited, first signing up to participate in online surveys regularly and subsequently deciding whether or not to participate in a specific survey, specific mechanisms of self-selection and incentivization being unknown (Bosnjak et al., 2013), but meeting industry guidelines (Goritz, 2010). Because we had not purchased a list of the names or position of potential respondents, we had no control regarding who actually received the questionnaire. We were also not able, due to the contract with the online panel company, to request contact details from responding SMEs. We therefore added two further criteria: (1) the respondent was the owner, owner/manager, manager or a senior person, and (2) where the respondent was a senior person s/he had been working for the SME for at least one year.

Each of these criteria was incorporated as separate screening questions at the start of the questionnaire; responses being tracked through the survey software in real time by the online panel company to establish those potential respondents who were screened out and ensured they were not resent the questionnaire. The panel company also tracked how many respondents finished the questionnaire, allowing them to keep a tally of the total number of completed questionnaires.

The questionnaire was delivered in waves by the online panel company using a hyperlink in an email written by the company to SME owners, managers or other senior people who were members of their volunteer panel. Our explanation of the research was therefore included at the start of the questionnaire followed by the six questions to ensure our inclusion criteria were met. Overall 2,373 respondents consented to participate in the research, of which 1,128 met the pre-specified inclusion criteria and 1,015 completed the questionnaire, it taking one month from launch to exceed the target of 1,000 responses. Of these, all had 80 per cent or more of the crucial questions answered, these being considered complete returns. Once again, demographic data, when compared with Department of Business Innovation and Skills (2015) estimates indicated over representation from certain UK regions (notably London and the South East; Table 6) and certain sectors (notably manufacturing and finance and insurance activities; Table 7). These differences, whilst significant, were overall not as marked as those using data obtained using the compiled list; data collected rarely differing significantly between early and late respondents. As with the data collected using a compiled list, subsequent analyses took account of these differences.

Recommendations for Research Practice

Our analysis of the HRD, HRM and bestselling business and management research methods texts highlighted a lack of emphasis of the process of gaining physical access to respondents for large multi-organization surveys and, within this, the use of Internet questionnaires. This is paralleled by many of the questionnaire/survey texts such as Dillman et al. (2014), Ekinci (2015), and Oppenheim (1998). These, whilst acknowledging potential difficulties with gaining physical access to respondents, focus upon ways to enhance response rates once the potential respondent has been reached. To address this omission, drawing on our earlier inside accounts and analysis of published studies in HRD journals, we now offer nine recommendations organized by stage of research.

Preparation Including Contingency Planning Stage

Our experiences of gaining physical access highlighted in the two inside accounts reveal a series of interrelated issues regarding the quality of purchased email lists or use of online panels and the need to assess for potential bias in respondent composition. In such situations, it might be prudent to pilot, using a smaller sample, to establish the likely response rate and the representativeness of respondents in relation to the composition of the target population. Websites of companies selling third party lists and the services of volunteer panels may contain evidence of evaluation by previous customers. In such situations, it may also be worth soliciting previous customers to verify their experience. Our first and second recommendations therefore relate to establishing list accuracy and representativeness:

1. Always check third party compiled lists and volunteer panels for accuracy, even if purchased from a reputable source.
2. Use pilot testing to establish the likely response rate and likely representativeness of respondents.

Our inside accounts highlight the importance of not being overly optimistic about likely response rates and the need to err on the side of caution. The first account discussing the use of a compiled list reveals the need to assume a low response rate, and ensure that the research budget is of a size that can cope with this. If a minimum of 1,000 responses is required and a response rate of 10 per cent assumed (the lowest suggested by Baruch & Holtom, 2008) at least 10,000 names are needed in the purchased compiled list. Alternatively, as in the second account, there is a need to ensure that panel data payment is on the basis of complete returns. Either can be costly necessitating prior planning to establish the necessary budget. We therefore recommend:

3. Ensure that the compiled list or volunteer panel is sufficiently large to accommodate low response rates, meet the requirements of sponsors and support reliable statistical analysis.
4. Establish the financial implications of purchasing sufficiently large list or incentivizing complete returns from a panel.

Data Collection Stage

Whilst panel companies will usually keep a tally of the total number of returns as part of their contract, it is important to monitor complete and partial returns on a daily basis when using both compiled lists and volunteer panels. As part of monitoring, it is helpful to have an understanding if certain groups are underrepresented. This will allow for contingency plans to be activated sooner rather than later. If returns are initially low, whilst acknowledging reminders can increase response rates, it is important to be realistic. Responses are unlikely

to increase greatly, even after such follow-up requests to respond. Consequently, we recommend:

5. Log actual and complete returns regularly against sample requirements so that it becomes clear at an early stage, if response targets or representativeness are unlikely to be met.
6. Be persistent and follow-up non-respondents and organizations that help in distributing the questionnaire with polite but regular reminders to maximize returns.

Our first inside account highlighted clearly how response rates can be far lower than expected. In this account, we had not considered initially alternative gatekeepers or stakeholders and so did not have a contingency plan. Yet, we were able to seek assistance and utilize alternative sources of potential respondents, particularly sources with whom we had collaborated on previous research projects. Our inside accounts reveal that three weeks after a survey launch, even allowing for a reminder being sent to respondents, we received few additional returns. Consequently, our next recommendation emphasizes the need to:

7. Have a contingency plan to activate if response rates are lower than expected.

Whilst our use of alternative sources of potential respondents enabled us to meet the target of at least 1,000 respondents using the compiled list our comparison of selected characteristics of those who responded with existing published data revealed significant differences. Our use of wave analysis also indicated potential bias. Noting this technique is one of a range of non-response bias checking techniques (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007), we recommend:

8. Utilize a range of techniques to assess the impact of non-response bias on the data obtained from respondents.

Reporting Stage

Our examination of recently published studies in five HRD journals revealed that issues of access are rarely reported in any detail, this being often part of a lack of information regarding methodology and method. While we were able to ascertain that over 40 per cent of questionnaire studies used Internet questionnaires, this proportion is likely to be an underestimate due to the lack of detail in reporting. This lack of detail also means we were unable to ascertain whether researchers had observed issues such as possible bias in sample composition or addressed than in subsequent analyses. Building on a recent call for unambiguous and correct reporting of HRD research findings (Reio, 2016) we contend this should be extended to include the provision of a transparent and convincing methods section. Our final recommendation for those undertaking large multi-organization surveys is therefore:

9. Ensure reporting of method outlines the process of gaining access, incorporating explicit recognition where samples may not be representative of the target population and, if necessary an exposition of the use contingencies to mitigate such problems.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

A listing of our recommendations can be found in Table 8. Our work has potential implications for both HRD academics and practitioners. Firstly, our recommendations, if followed, may assist academics in gaining research proposal approval by Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), in part, because they may improve the size and potential representativeness of survey returns. IRBs are not merely concerned with issues such as confidentiality and ‘doing no harm’. Receiving multiple requests from academics to complete a questionnaire may generate amongst businesses a cynicism or even hostility to university research, exacerbating the ‘academic-practitioner’ divide (Gray, Iles & Watson, 2011; Saunders, 2011). Secondly,

our analysis demonstrates the importance of more extensive preparation and contingency planning before launching multi-organization surveys. While not rejecting the use of lists purchased from third party organizations, our experience emphasizes the importance of careful checking and the potential implications of using different lists on the resultant respondents' characteristics. It also emphasizes the potential for a low ratio of responses to requests to participate, when using such lists. In contrast, our experience of using a volunteer panel was relatively quick, seamless and stress free (particularly the latter!) Respondents' representativeness does, of course, again depend on the nature of the volunteer panel. Careful checking of lists and pilot testing above, may help here. Thirdly, given the increasing popularity of Internet over face-to-face or paper-based surveys, we note that research teams or individual researchers should ensure they have access to IT experts who understand the technical causes of 'hard bounces' and how these can be minimized. In our first insider account it was not possible to ascertain the impact of, for example, the wording of our email request or the inclusion of a hyperlink on bounce back. Fourthly, we challenge academics and practitioners when writing about undertaking multi-organization surveys, to report, in detail, how access was attained, what problems were faced, and how they were addressed (and with what success). It is only by discussing the problems and issues faced in gaining physical access to multiple organizations that we can learn how to do it better.

Lastly, we acknowledge some of the limitations of this study and make suggestions for future research. In our research, we have focused here on gaining physical access to large samples of SMEs, but have said nothing about multi organization studies involving employees holding particular roles in large-scale corporations or public sector organizations. Future studies could address this gap, particularly evaluating the quality (or otherwise) of compiled lists from third party organizations and the use of volunteer panels. Future studies could also address another shortcoming of our UK-focused study - exploring the implications for access when undertaking cross-border, international surveys. We began by saying that gaining access to organizations in survey research is rarely a logical, smooth and seamless process. So, let us acknowledge this, share experiences and learn from each other.

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Table 1
Top Ranking Business and Management and HRM/HRD Research Methods Texts

| Author(s) | Amazon.com ranking | Amazon.co.uk ranking |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Business and management texts</i> | | |
| Blumberg et al. (2014) | 25,716 | >100,000 |
| Brewerton & Millward (2001) | 83,223 | >100,000 |
| Bryman & Bell (2015) | 64,884 | 46,544 |
| Polonsky & Walker (2014) | 41,688 | >100,000 |
| Saunders et al. (2016) | 79,088 | 7,545 |
| Sekaran & Bougie (2016) ^a | 23,641 | >100,000 |
| Wilson (2014) | 82,425 | 73,472 |
| Zikmund et al. (2014) | 14,645 | >100,000 |
| <i>HRD/HRM texts</i> | | |
| Anderson (2013) | >1,000,000 | 128,597 |
| Clardy (1997) | 692,612 | >1,000,000 |
| Saunders & Tosey (2015) | >1,000,000 | 998,416 |
| Swanson & Holton (1997) | >1,000,000 | 276,135 |

Note:

Data from Amazon 31 August 2016, for business and management texts, those ranked in the top 100,000 were included, for HRM/HRD texts those ranked in the top 1,000,000 were included.

^arankings relate to 2013 edition.

Table 2
Consideration of Access in Top Ranking Texts

| Author(s) | Number of pages in index entry | General/Physical/ Cognitive access discussed | Role of gatekeeper discussed | Single/Multiple organizations discussed in relation to access | Outsider/Insider research discussed in relation to access | Strategies/tips to assist access offered | Case study or example of access using Single/ Multiple organizations |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|------------------------------|---|---|--|---|
| <i>Business and management texts</i> | | | | | | | |
| Blumberg et al. (2014) | 0 ^a | G [P C] | [✓] | [S] | [O] | [✓] | S M |
| Brewerton & Millward (2001) | 8 | G P C | [✓] | S | O | ✓ | - |
| Bryman & Bell (2015) | 8 | G P C | ✓ | S [M] | O I | ✓ | S [M] |
| Polonsky & Waller (2014) | 0 | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Saunders et al. (2016) | 18 | G P C | ✓ | S [M] | O I | ✓ | S |
| Sekaran & Bougie (2016) | 0 | [G C] | - | - | - | [✓] | - |
| Wilson (2014) | 3 | G | [✓] | S [M] | I | ✓ | S |
| Zikmund et al. (2014) | 0 | G [P C] | [✓] | S [M] | [O I] | ✓ | S |
| <i>HRM/HRD texts</i> | | | | | | | |
| Anderson (2013) | 4 | G P [C] | [✓] | [S M] | O I | ✓ | - |
| Clardy (1997) | 0 | [C] | - | - | - | [✓] | - |
| Saunders & Tosey (2015) | 0 | [P C] | - | [SM] | - | [✓] | SM |
| Swanson & Holton (1997) | 0 | - | - | - | - ^b | - | - |

Notes: G = general access issues included, P = physical access issues included, C = cognitive access issues included, ✓ = included; no brackets = discussed/covered in detail, [] mentioned/implied/incorporated in wider example.

^aA sub entry for observation studies relates to 1 page discussing access.

^bFocus of text is of insiders studying their own organizations.

Table 3
Consideration of Access When Using Questionnaires in Top Ranking Texts

| Author(s) | Physical access | | Cognitive access | |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|--|---|
| | Strategies to ensure questionnaire actually reaches respondents | Case study or example of physical access with Single/Multiple organization | Strategies to improve response rates once questionnaire received | Case study or example of cognitive access with Single/Multiple organization |
| <i>Business and management texts</i> | | | | |
| Blumberg et al. (2014) | [✓] | S M | ✓ | [S M] |
| Brewerton & Millward (2001) | - | - | ✓ | [M] |
| Bryman & Bell (2015) | [✓] | [S M] | ✓ | [M] |
| Polonsky & Waller (2014) | - | - | - | - |
| Saunders et al. (2016) | [✓] | [S M] | ✓ | S M |
| Sekaran & Bougie (2016) | - | - | [✓] | - |
| Wilson (2014) | [✓] | - | [✓] | [M] |
| Zikmund et al. (2014) | ✓ | - | ✓ | [S M] |
| <i>HRM/HRD texts</i> | | | | |
| Anderson (2013) | - | - | [✓] | - |
| Clardy (1997) | - | - | - | - |
| Saunders & Tosey (2015) | - | [S] M | [✓] | S M |
| Swanson & Holton (1997) | - | - | - | - |

Notes: S = single organization focus, M = multiple organization focus, ✓ = included; no brackets = discussed/covered in detail, [] mentioned/implied/incorporated in wider example.

Table 4
Studies Using Questionnaires in Selected HRD Journals (2015)

| Journal | Number of studies stating used questionnaires | | | Number of studies stating used Internet questionnaires ^a | | |
|---|---|------------------------|-----------|---|------------------------|-----------|
| | Single organization | Multiple organizations | Total | Single organization | Multiple organizations | Total |
| European Journal of Training and Development | 3 | 8 | 11 | 2 | 5 | 7 |
| Human Resource Development International | 0 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Human Resource Development Quarterly | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| International Journal of Training and Development | 4 | 6 | 10 | 2 ^b | 4 | 6 |
| Management Learning | 1 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 8 | 21 | 29 | 4 | 10 | 14 |

^aexcludes nine studies where it was unclear how the questionnaire was delivered and collected.

^bincludes one questionnaire delivered both ‘online’ and as ‘paper’.

Table 5
Source of Respondents for Studies Using Questionnaires in Selected HRD Journals (2015)

| Source from which respondents selected | Studies stating used questionnaires | | | Studies stating used Internet questionnaires ^a | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-------|---|------------------------|-------|
| | Single organization | Multiple organizations | Total | Single organization | Multiple organizations | Total |
| Study organization(s)' employees | 6 | 7 | 13 | 3 ^b | 2 ^c | 5 |
| Compiled list from a third party organization | 2 | 11 | 13 | 1 | 6 | 7 |
| Researcher compiled list | 0 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| All | 8 | 21 | 29 | 4 | 10 | 14 |

^aexcludes nine studies where it was unclear how the questionnaire was delivered and collected.

^bincludes one questionnaire delivered both 'online' and as 'paper'.

^cincludes one questionnaire delivered both 'online' and as 'paper' and one questionnaire delivered using Linked-In.

Table 6
Survey Responses and UK SME Estimates by Economic Planning Region

| Economic Planning Region | 2012 | | 2015 | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Compiled list respondents | UK Estimate ^a | Volunteer panel respondents | UK Estimate ^b |
| North East | 2.4% | 2.6% | 3.3% | 3.0% |
| North West | 6.6% | 10.0% | 8.9% | 10.4% |
| Yorkshire and the Humber | 4.8% | 7.3% | 5.4% | 7.7% |
| East Midlands | 4.8% | 6.8% | 6.6% | 7.0% |
| West Midlands | 5.8% | 7.3% | 5.6% | 8.2% |
| East of England | 4.0% | 10.4% | 6.4% | 9.7% |
| South East (excluding London) | 42.9% | 16.4% | 20.2% | 16.2% |
| London | 12.7% | 16.5% | 26.6% | 14.7% |
| South West | 6.5% | 9.4% | 7.5% | 9.1% |
| Wales | 1.9% | 4.2% | 2.7% | 4.1% |
| Scotland | 3.9% | 6.4% | 5.2% | 7.5% |
| Northern Ireland | 3.6% | 2.7% | 1.5% | 2.4% |
| Total (=100%) | 1,181 | 4,536,445 | 1,128 | 488,250 |

Notes:

^aSource: Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2012).

^bSource: Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2012); Excludes SMEs with 0-4 employees.

Table 7
Survey responses and UK SME Estimates by Industry Sector

| Industry (UK SIC) | 2012 | | 2015 | |
|---|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Compiled list respondents | UK Estimate ^a | Volunteer panel respondents | UK Estimate ^b |
| Agriculture, Mining & Utilities | 2.6% | 3.8% | 3.1% | 3.1% |
| Manufacturing | 10.0% | 4.9% | 15.3% | 9.6% |
| Construction | 5.0% | 20.6% | 6.9% | 8.7% |
| Retail and Wholesale | 6.5% | 9.0% | 12.9% | 20.1% |
| Transportation and Storage | 2.5% | 5.9% | 4.5% | 3.3% |
| Accommodation and Food Services | 1.4% | 1.5% | 3.2% | 13.0% |
| Information and Communication | 11.8% | 6.2% | 7.5% | 4.1% |
| Finance and Insurance Activities | 6.7% | 1.9% | 6.0% | 1.7% |
| Real Estate Activities | 2.7% | 1.8% | 2.5% | 2.9% |
| Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities | 22.2% | 13.7% | 11.6% | 10.4% |
| Administrative and Support Services Activities | 5.1% | 7.6% | 5.9% | 7.5% |
| Education | 4.2% | 5.6% | 2.1% | 1.9% |
| Human Health and Social Work Activities | 3.7% | 7.2% | 3.9% | 7.7% |
| Arts, Entertainment and Recreation | 3.4% | 4.7% | 3.2% | 2.0% |
| Other Service Activities | 11.1% | 5.7% | 11.2% | 4.1% |
| Other (please say) | 1.1% | - | - | - |
| Total =100% | 967 | 4,536,445 | 1,023 | 488,250 |

Notes:

^aSource: Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2012).

^bSource: Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2012); Excludes SMEs with 0-4 employees.

Table 8
Recommendations for Research Practice

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1. Always check third party compiled lists and volunteer panels for accuracy, even if purchased from a reputable source.
 2. Use pilot testing to establish the likely response rate and likely representativeness of respondents.
 3. Ensure that the compiled list or volunteer panel is sufficiently large to accommodate low response rates, meet the requirements of sponsors and support reliable statistical analysis.
 4. Establish the financial implications of purchasing sufficiently large list or incentivizing complete returns from a panel.
 5. Log actual and complete returns regularly against sample requirements so that it becomes clear at an early stage, if response targets or representativeness are unlikely to be met.
 6. Be persistent and follow-up non-respondents and organizations that help in distributing the questionnaire with polite but regular reminders to maximize returns.
 7. Have a contingency plan to activate if response rates are lower than expected.
 8. Utilize a range of techniques to assess the impact of non-response bias on the data obtained from respondents.
 9. Ensure reporting of method outlines the process of gaining access, incorporating explicit recognition where samples may not be representative of the target population and, if necessary an exposition of the use contingencies to mitigate such problems.
-