Editorial

Methodologies in work-based research: finding the right fit

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Abstract
This editorial article introduces a practical toolkit to support researchers in selecting appropriate methodologies for work-based inquiry. Emphasising the importance of aligning research methods with research aims, the article explores key methodological paradigms - qualitative, quantitative, interpretivist, ethnographic, case study, action research, and positivist approaches - highlighting their relevance and application in workplace contexts. The toolkit uses visual aids and practical examples to help practitioners conceptualise research designs that reflect real-world complexities, including change management scenarios. It also stresses the value of reflective practice and adaptability in the research process, particularly within collaborative, iterative frameworks such as action research. Methodological choices are made simple and thoughtful selection is encouraged, based on context, purpose, and desired output. This resource ultimately equips vocational and professional researchers with accessible guidance for effective research design and data collection, offering a foundation for deeper insight and meaningful organisational improvement through tailored research strategies.

Keywords
Action research, quantitative, qualitative, interpretivism, ethnography.

Introduction

Think of your methodology as a set of guidelines, or a plan for your research design. Choosing the correct method or approach for your research can make all the difference to whether your work meets its desired aim and objectives and makes the desired impact. This toolkit gives you some insight into differing methodologies and research paradigms as a way of thinking about what might be the right *'fit'* for your intended research. Selecting the method is based on a number of factors; asking what has been done before (O'Leary & Hunt, 2016), what the focus was and how it can assist your decision, but in the first instance it is important to focus precisely on what you are trying to achieve. Isolating this through using a framework such as ISCO can be useful.

- Issue: something that keeps arising or that you or others have attempted to fix that doesn't go away.
- Situation: perhaps something that you can see arising (or that could arise) perhaps through Horizon Scanning or another internal mechanism that needs addressing before it occurs.
- Concern: internal audits and feedback mechanisms often raise areas for attention, or concern. This could be an underperforming product or team for example, or as a result of people's reaction to a restructure or change.
- Opportunity: to trial or design something to pilot. This could be from stakeholder feedback, through team meetings, internal evaluations or systems.

Once you have isolated this and begun to draft out the overall aim and your objectives you can turn your attention to the planning. Planned research methods are central to the success or otherwise. Here we consider some of the more common approaches to workplace research with some examples for you to consider. It is worth noting that there may be more than one way your chosen research could be taken, so careful consideration is needed, it takes time.

Qualitative vs quantitative

The decision in selecting whether to use quantitative or qualitative inquiry should not be taken quickly. It is important to understand the difference between the two, as the outputs from each are starkly different. Quantitative enquiry is mainly concerned with scientific approaches; questions like, how much, how many, how effective; are common. Answers are primarily evidenced within the data gathered (Park & Park, 2016). Because the data is primarily reported through numbers, in some instances a quantitative enquiry may form the basis of initial research, which may well provide a springboard for qualitative enquiry. Because the research is dependent on numbers, quantitative research is concerned with large sample groups.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, is useful to understand more complex issues, beyond obvious questions, for example those concerned with preferences, job satisfaction, what works and what does not. It can begin to unpick more thorny issues or conundrums. Qualitative research brings understandings, and tells stories about people, their encounters and experiences. The illustration in figure 1 focusses on the subject of Change Management, it illustrates how one theme can be taken in many different directions, with vastly different output. Each methodology is explained below this graphic.

Research philosophies and methodologies

It is easy to become confused or overwhelmed by the terms and words used in research. In this section we bring some definitions to these and what these might look like and mean for your work.

What is meant by research philosophy?

Research Philosophies are sets of assumptions that guide research, they encompass how different researchers see the world, how they approach research during the

process of design and in the execution of the work itself. They have a bearing on how you analyse and present the data.

What is a paradigm?

The word paradigm comes from the original Greek word Paradeigma, meaning pattern. Today, in research the word is taken to refer to practices, norms and standards (Kuhn, 1972). We will look at a few of these in the paragraphs that follow, but of course there are many more.

What is the difference between paradigm and methodologies?

Methodologies refer to systematic plans, designed specifically to address the issue that you are grappling with. With some research the kinds of questions being asked need elements from different paradigms, so do not always 'comply' with a singular set of practices or norms, instead they make use of a variety of means to get to the nitty gritty.
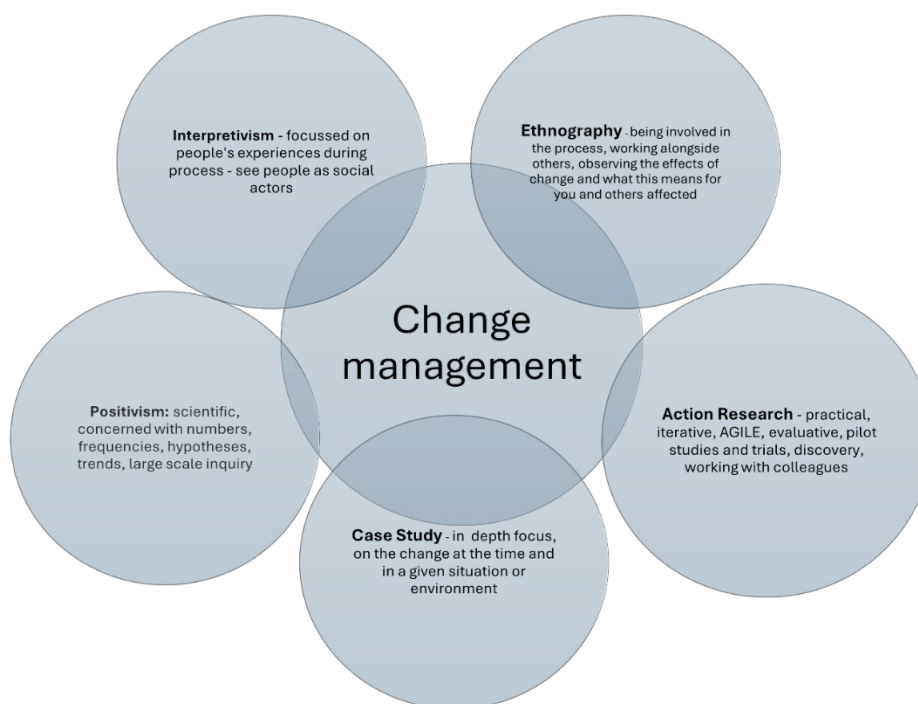

Figure 1. How the different approaches affect the focus of the research, and the data collected.

Action research

Action research as a methodology, is characterised by Research *in Action*. Its use can be found across a wide range of sectors including Business, Engineering, Farming and Health (Shani & Coghlan, 2021). It is distinctly different from other methods. Working with this methodology gives the opportunity to combine theory or concepts

with practice which is integrated with organisational knowledge. It has the capacity to address real and pertinent issues. In essence it is concerned with bringing about change and is immersed in collaboration and inquiry. Its use is open to a small number of participants, as well as larger teams.

The nature of the work means that it is carried out *with* people, rather than being about people or their thoughts or being designed for others to take part in. There is a sense of discovering and learning together (Coghlan & Holian, 2023). As a result, the work becomes iterative, throughout the inquiry processes or approaches can be changed, redesigned or dropped entirely. Action Research can make use of multiple forms of data and is evaluated during the course of the inquiry as well as after the process has been concluded. Though the research itself will bring recommendations for future use or implementation, results can be seen to be emerging during the course of the research process. In choosing a methodology, Action Research could be an ideal choice to test or pilot an initiative over a short period of time.

Case study

Case studies are often derided as weak and ineffectual method for research. Done well, with meticulous planning, the opposite is true. Because of the depth of the study, they can provide a powerful way of presenting data, and are particularly useful in workplace research (Tight, 2017).   It is possible to combine a research paradigm with a case study. For instance, a study focussed on staffs' experiences following a merger or acquisition would make an ideal choice for combining interpretivism with case study, putting people and their experiences as a main focus. Case studies can present multiple different cases, that of different participants, departments or organisations for example. In doing so, the main framework for what will be included for all, and what is outside of scope must be identified early in the decision-making process. Case studies usually fall into one of three categories:

- Descriptive: the purpose is to describe a phenomenon.
- Explanatory: a case study whose purpose is to explain how or why some condition came to be, or why some sequence of events occurred or did not occur.
- Exploratory: a case study whose purpose is to identify the research questions or procedures to be used in a subsequent study (Salmons, 2021).

Case studies are characterised by the rich description needed to delve into and present complex situations or to help to reveal differences or peculiarities and the reasons for these. It is the rich description and focus that brings meaning and kudos to the research itself. Some people would suggest that the work from a case study is limited given the intense focus and that this is not transferable. This misses the point, case studies can bring insights, and reveal data, which in other formats would be less impactful. Case studies have the capacity to set precedents or become documents to refer to as sources of learning, especially in sense making or for informing strategic intent.

Qualitative Paradigms

Interpretivism

Interpretivism is posed as a way to help to understand and interpret the social world. Its focus is the uniqueness of situations, on people and their experiences or perceptions in an attempt to unpick different perspectives or understandings of a situation. Participants are sometimes referred to as social actors, in other words that they live by and perform certain tasks or behaviours in work on a daily basis (Chowdhury, 2014; Saunders et al., 2023). Interpretivist inquiry believes that every person's experience is important. Samples are often small but can bring powerful stories that other methods cannot reveal. Interpretivism has the capacity to unpick thorny or difficult situations, for example experiences of change either in work through restructures, being on the receiving end of a mandated policy, or a new procedure or way of working. As such it is not unusual for illustrations or drawings to be used as one way of gathering data.

Ethnography

Ethnographic research is concerned with illuminating peoples' environments and lived experiences. Whilst the image that this conjures up in your mind might take you to more arcane regions of the world, ethnography also has a place in workplace research to shed light on circumstances or situations that are poorly understood, or that have been approached unsuccessfully by other means. Ethnographic research is carried out in natural environments to allow for normal behaviours, actions, and quotidian routines. It is also possible for the researcher themselves to be part of the research process, alongside other participants. Ethnographic research presents very detailed accounts, which can also be presented as case studies. Ethnographic research also has the capacity to illuminate practices or ways of living or working considered to be primitive or old fashioned, to reveal innovative or entrepreneurial practices that have the potential to disrupt current ways of working (Saunders et al., 2023).

Quantitative inquiry

Positivism

If you adopt a positivist view of the world, then you prefer to work from a scientific perspective. Positivists believe that science is the only way to come to the truth, through the nature of observable phenomena, that the answer to the question or dilemma is 'posited' or can be seen in the data itself. This is undisputed and becomes fact. Positivists research strategies might call on existing theory or models; equally a hypothesis might be developed on which to base the inquiry, which will either stand as a whole or in part, or fall, leading to more tests and theories. Positivist inquiry can be a useful way to establish indicators or possible causes but also to rule out initial assumptions. Social sciences, medicine and government departments and the civil service are some of the areas where positivist inquiry are commonly used. Large organisations may gather data by surveying through questionnaire to gather staffs or customers thoughts on a variety of themes. As the focus for positivists is on confirming outcomes through observational data, large numbers or samples or participants are

required to aid validity. With large numbers, researchers may call upon software such as SPSS to aid with analysis.

Conclusion

To conclude this editorial paper, the table that follows gives some examples of questions or themes for change management, a possible methodology and ways of gathering data to aid in the decision-making process.

Table 1. Examples of questions, suggested methodologies, and data gathering modes.

Methodology	Example question or focus	Possible ways of gathering data
Methodologies		
Action research	To collaboratively develop and implement change management strategies within the Human Resource department	Iterative reassessment of strategies, collaborative documents, reflection, observations, evaluations, diaries, focus groups, filmed footage, recordings, participant/stakeholder feedback.
Case Study	Examining the impact of leadership styles on the implementation of change initiatives	Observations, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, document analysis (of the change initiatives, e-mails, policies, existing reports etc.)
Quantitative		
Positivism	To assess the impact of change management interventions on productivity – possible use of hypothesis • H1 – The introduction of change management will result in significant increase in productivity	Large scale survey, performance metrics – statistical analysis, trends, averages, hypothesis testing, correlations, structured interviews, tests and controlled experiments. Use of graphs, bar charts, scatter diagrams, pie charts etc are common.
Qualitative		
Ethnography	How do informal networks and relationships influence the adoption of policies and procedures	Observations, photographs, semi-structured interviews, verbatim reports or recordings. Naturally occurring documents (emails, agendas etc). Own reflective diarised experiences
Interpretivism	To explore the staffs' experiences of change management interventions	Interviews, participant drawings, focus groups, participant reflections, participant stories or poems, use of words to describe an image or feeling, posters.

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