

A thought experiment

Ever thought about the volume of information generated in a typical piece of qualitative research, asks John Griffiths, and how much of the learning is transferred?



We're usually more concerned about the thoroughness of the analysis, how well it stands up to scrutiny, how long it takes and how much it costs: six hours of fieldwork, 18 hours of analysis/writing up converted into one hour of debrief. In other words, we're focused on the quality of the result.

But how much gets lost on the way? How much is captured? We've all been in the position when the projector is switched off, the deck has been handed over and the researcher keeps talking. And most of what they're saying isn't in the final presentation – it's implicit knowledge that leaks out slowly and often unexpectedly.

Recently I asked Gill Ereaut and Chris Barnham – at the AQR Not The Christmas party – to estimate how much of the learnings gained from a piece of qual ended up in the client's possession. Their guesstimate was 40%.

Now before you panic, this remnant is still perfectly acceptable for making decisions – and were we to have a way of detecting and transferring all the learnings it would probably take longer to retrieve them than the client would have the patience to take it all in. Unfortunately for the client, though, that still means that half of what has been learned in a project walks out the door at the end of the meeting.

get refreshed and amplified. It may not, however, be until the second or third project that the accumulation of learning will increase the transfer efficiency above 50%, as earlier learnings are refreshed, reinforced and built on by the new learnings.

3 Ensure good storage facilities for your learnings: good refrigeration to keep the research reasonably fresh and accessible and strategies for disseminating it through your organisation. After the initial debrief, count how many times a piece of research is used to brief or to induct. Perhaps you ought to organise regular 'tribal gatherings' in your company where the customer learnings are once again presented and reinforced.

4 Lastly, the importance of effective transfer skills. If you know that you're only going to capture a proportion of the learnings then

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Actually it's worse than that. To quote the authors of *Funky Business*: 'Knowledge is like milk – it has a sell-by date'. From the minute the report is in your palm it starts to go out of date. Typically, after two years the learnings have evaporated – you would have to go and do the research again to be sure. And in some fast moving sectors this decay rate is as fast as 24 weeks.

There are four learnings from this – and I'll try to transfer them to you as speedily as possible!

1 Every time a researcher gets run over by a bus, the country ought to hold a minute's silence, because we've just lost nearly £3/4m-worth of learnings. The sums are simple: if a quallie is doing three projects of four groups apiece a month worth, say, £10,000 apiece, then even taking into account the decay rate that represents a mega loss! So remember: that researcher is walking around with your paid-for learnings in their heads. Call them up, ask questions, consult the oracle! Don't leave it all to the debrief.

2 Consider the value of long-term relationships. The quickest way to increase the proportion of knowledge transfer is to give serial projects to the same researcher – that way the learnings

ensure that you don't lose even more because of poor presentation writing, poor delivery and meetings full of late arrivals and early leavers. Give researchers feedback. If they aren't being clear then pick them up on it. It's costing you learnings. As qualitative methodologies become more complex, drawing on more elaborate projectives and respondent exercises, it's vital that you understand the significance of all the glamorous props. They're not just brought to the presentation as a sign that respondents enjoyed themselves, strange though that may seem.

In summary, remember that knowledge is neither fixed nor stable. It is most happy sitting in people's heads and it takes real work and application to get it out into a form that can be moved around inside an organisation. Like a plant it needs watering and nurturing – neglected you'll lose it.

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