Using research: Supporting organizational change and improvement
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Using research
Supporting organizational change and improvement

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‘Whatever type of research project you undertake, always ask yourself why you are doing it and what you hope to achieve’

Abstract
Explores the importance of organizational research as a tool to support business change and improvement. Describes a tried and tested research methodology that has been used within public and private sector organizations and can be easily adapted by in-house research and information services. Demonstrates how research can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of learning and development products and services. Includes a case study from a central government department that investigates the role of the line manager in learning.

Keywords: action research, analysis, business change, business improvement, evaluation, knowledge management, primary research, research objective, secondary research

Introduction
‘Research is the process of arriving at dependable solutions to problems through planned and systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of data. It is an important tool for advancing knowledge’. (Mouly cited in Wellington, 2000)

In a business climate of at best extreme cost-consciousness and at worst the threat of business failure, organizational research can be the key to informed and confident decision-making to support change and improvement. Research conversations in public and private sector organizations are peppered with words and phrases such as business-focused, evidence-based business case, evaluating effectiveness, driving change and demonstrating value.

Why organizations are using research
Organizational research seeks to advance understanding of people, process, business and management issues to improve individual and organizational
performance and effectiveness. It is a fundamental activity within many of today’s organizations. Research can be strategic or tactical; it can be holistic or tightly focused. Work-based research projects are often extremely focused and practical. They have clearly defined goals and are seen as key to ongoing organizational development and innovation.

In today’s fast-moving society where knowledge is the second most powerful organizational currency, research is often critical to organizational survival. Some of the most successful and high performing organizations such as: Microsoft, Mckinsey, BP, and Harvard Business School invest heavily in research to improve their knowledge and understanding and drive their future strategy. They are also noticeably better than most at managing what they know and abstracting value from individual and organizational knowledge.

Much research that takes place today in public, private and academic organizations aims to turn ideas into action and action into ideas. Research is being used within organizations to:

- Support thought leadership
- Drive business improvement, innovation and creativity
- Increase individual and collective knowledge and understanding
- Inform business planning and strategy
- Benchmark the performance of individuals, team or functions
- Inform the acquisition or integration of a new business
- Evaluate the effectiveness of a process, product or service
- Identify skills gaps

**Research methodology**

Whether you are an external research consultant or the manager of an internal research/information function a robust methodology is a critical part of your armoury. A research methodology such as the one outlined here (see Figure 1) provides a pragmatic yet robust approach to evidence-based research and analysis.

**Establish context**

Within any research assignment, establishing context is critical to a successful outcome. We recommend that in-house/external research services work with their clients to:

- Gain understanding of the background to the project
- Clarify the purpose
- Understand the parameters
- Assess the culture
- Establish key stakeholders

This process enables a clear research purpose statement to be created by refining the research objectives and clarifying the key deliverables. It is also important at this stage to communicate your research code of conduct. The purpose of which is to highlight the objectivity of your approach and your commitment to client confidentiality and data integrity.

Extract from MRS (Professional Market and Social Research Body) Code of Conduct:

- The rights of respondents as private individuals and members of a private organisation will be respected and they will not be harmed or disadvantaged as the result of cooperating in a research project.
- Researchers will ensure complete client data confidentiality and integrity via strict adherence to quality standards.
- Researchers will never allow personal data they collect in a project to be used for any purpose other than the original research objective without the
consent of the client and any stakeholders or interested parties.

- Researchers will ensure that all projects and activities are designed, carried out, reported and documented accurately, transparently, impartially, objectively and to appropriate quality.

**Select and design research methods**

It is important to evaluate which primary and secondary research methods will most effectively combine to best meet the brief and objectives. Once the research purpose statement has been agreed with the client it is critical to define the required data points that will then form the basis for the design of your research approach. Each data point should represent a key facet of information that will combine to inform the research purpose. For example if the research purpose is: ‘To evaluate the effectiveness of the Recruitment Process’ – then key data points could be: Total cost of recruitment, Source(s) of successful candidates, Staff turnover, Number of candidates per vacancy, length of recruitment process, and so on. Primary research methods include; action research sets ‘research while doing’, participant observation, discussions with industry experts and subject gurus, liaison with trade bodies and professional associations and institutions, structured interviews and focus groups for smaller numbers and for large research samples questionnaires and surveys that combine qualitative and quantitative techniques and are an excellent source of data. Secondary research methods include: desk research of published reports, articles and company/market intelligence and a review of grey literature. Structured or functional benchmarking exercises can also be used to review internal processes or conduct competitor analysis.

**Undertake research**

Undertake research with a representative sample of your total population. If appropriate pilot your research methods to ensure that they provide you with the level of evidence you require. Ensure that your research sample understand the purpose of your research and their role within it.

**Analysis and validation**

Once all of the evidence has been gathered it can be evaluated using numerical, thematic and coding techniques. At times this may highlight conflicting evidence that will require further investigation before decisive action can be taken. It is important at this stage to identify trends and insights and also to formulate initial comment, recommendations and conclusions.

Coding Frame/Content Analysis – A tool to aid the sorting and analysis of qualitative data. The coding frame enables you to classify data into categories and sub-categories. The researcher may already have a list of categories or they may read through each transcript and let the categories emerge from the data. Some researchers adopt a combination of both approaches.

Thematic Analysis – Data which is analysed by theme. This can be done during the data collection phase or afterwards. It is less mechanistic than a coding frame, and is useful where there are large amounts of text such as during a focus group, literature review or unstructured interview transcripts.

**Create research output(s)**

The final research output(s) should be produced in a format that is tailored to the client’s specification so that it can be directly implemented.

**Review and evaluate**

Project review and evaluation which includes both individual and team review and is carried out at key milestones during the project, and upon project completion is a valuable tool to capture lessons learned, performance evidence and new individual and organizational knowledge. The format of the interim project reviews can be virtual or face to face depending upon time and resources. However, the final project review meeting should ideally be facilitated by an independent member of staff and be face to face. The review should be carried out using a standard data capture template. The main purposes of the review are to:

1. Assess whether the project has met the original purpose and objectives.

2. Apply the learning and experience from this project to future interventions. This will look at what went well and what could have gone better. It will evaluate the performance of individual team members and the success of the team as a whole. It will also evaluate any new knowledge gained or lessons learned and ensure that these are captured and built into future projects.
3. Judge the effectiveness, efficiency, or cost of an assignment. This requires gathering of information and evidence to make decisions about the overall success. It looks at how effective the project was and will then go on to evaluate whether it operated in an efficient manner. This is also where a cost/benefit analysis can be carried out.

**Knowledge management**

To support effective knowledge management it is important to capture new tools, techniques and knowledge as soon as possible rather than wait until full project completion. Therefore, a project review process should include regular assessment of new knowledge and skill creation and ensure any new tools, techniques and learning is captured and shared as appropriate. Skills transfer and personal development are a key part of many projects so the assessment and evidence gathering related to this also forms a core part of the review process. Another successful knowledge sharing tool is to create a case study to tell the story of a project in an interesting, educational and informative way. Finally, the use of informal feedback and coaching throughout all projects to highlight development areas and to encourage skill development via experiential learning is very valuable.

**Public sector case study**

The following case study illustrates how the methodology outlined has been applied within a large UK public sector organisation.

**Background**

The role of the line manager within the public and private sector is changing. Organizations are constantly striving to improve efficiency and effectiveness and therefore want people to do more with less. Within the majority of organizations there has been a gradual devolvement of responsibility for Human Resources (HR) to the line manager. The argument being that this allows line managers to manage, and HR to focus on strategic level decision-making. What this means in practice is that line managers take increased responsibility for processes such as recruitment, discipline and grievance procedures, absence management and learning and development. The key issue therefore is whether managers are equipped with the skills and knowledge to effectively deliver these responsibilities, and if not what training is being given to them. This case study examines the role of the line manager in learning.

The role of the line manager is critical to training and development in organisations. Line managers initiate a high percentage of the training. They are also responsible for over half of the discussions with employees on the effectiveness of training that take place. Ensuring that line managers have the skills for and are committed to support learning and development is essential. (Who Learns at Work?, 2005)

The Organizational Capability function of a central government department commissioned research into the role of the line manager in learning. The purpose was to establish the current reality of this role was within the department and to gather data, opinions and aspirations of line managers in respect of their role, and the tools available to them, to help to shape future learning and development initiatives and inform strategy.

The required output of the project was a detailed report containing all of the research evidence and a summary presentation highlighting key findings and suggested improvements and developments which could be used to communicate the research effectively to stakeholders, staff and management.

The client also required that the project enabled skills transfer from the consultants to the several members of the learning and development team and therefore a joint project team was required to plan, design and deliver the evaluation project.

**Project planning and start-up**

At the project start-up meeting we referred to the original invitation to tender documents to discuss and collectively agree and sign up to the research purpose statement and objectives.

Research Purpose Statement:

To evaluate the line manager’s role in learning from a personal, team and organizational perspective.

The objectives of the research were to:

- Understand the current learning challenges line managers face
• Understand how line managers enable the learning of their staff

• Gather evidence of the ways that line managers learn

• Explore the range of learning resources that are available to them and evaluate how these resources support learning

• Identify any cultural barriers to learning

• Highlight skill and capability gaps

• Gather real-life good and bad case studies of learning experiences from a variety of line managers

• Gather evidence of learning engagement and satisfaction levels

We then created a detailed project plan which formed the frame of reference throughout the project and included:

• Details of the research population and required sample size

• An outline of the proposed research methods

• A detailed action plan that outlined all of the key project stages and milestones (preparation and communication, delivery, analysis and validation and finally reporting and presentation), activities, resources, timescales, roles and responsibilities and agreed deliverables

• Project budget details, risk assessment and contingency plan

• Communication strategy

• Quality assurance mechanisms

Establishing data points

Once the project plan had been completed we focused on defining the information and evidence we needed to gain to inform our research purpose. To gain a realistic understanding of how line managers learn and how they develop others we tracked the line manager's experience of learning and development through the stages: outlined in Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Awareness</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Effectiveness</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2 – Stages of experience

For each stage we then considered the specific data points that we needed to gather evidence for. We brainstormed all the potential aspects of each stage while being mindful of whether qualitative or quantitative data or a combination of the two would provide evidence. This resulted in the model in Figure 3, which we then used as a frame of reference for the creation of the research tools for the delivery phase.

Selecting the research method(s)

To support effective skills transfer we worked collectively to evaluate the pros and cons of each possible research method against our research purpose statement, while being attentive to time, cost and physical resource constraints. We concluded that a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods were required to ensure that the project captured a realistic and representative view of current practice.

Delivery

The research methods used were:

Literature review

A literature review of external research evidence regarding the role of the line manager in learning and development and a review of the content of the in-house learning and development portals that have been created to support the development of management and leadership skills.

Action research sets

Action research was one of the key research methods employed in this project to gather real-life evidence from line managers. Groups of 6 to 10 managers were invited to attend action research sessions where they were asked about their learning challenges, how they learn, how they develop others, what they see as their role in learning, what learning tools and resources are
available to them, and how effective they are. They were also required to record real-life learning and development issues and capture their findings in a specially designed action research journal. During a follow-up session they shared their findings with each other and also expressed ideas for a future vision for learning and development within the organization. The action research sets were carried out with a cross-section of line managers across four geographical regions.

**Online survey**

An online survey was created using an in-house survey tool to gain predominantly quantitative, but also some qualitative evidence. It was distributed widely and was completed by a representative sample of line managers. Questions from the survey included:

- Have you and your line manager agreed your learning objectives as part of your Personal Development Plan?
- What are your preferred modes of learning?
- Please rate your overall level of satisfaction regarding the learning and development that is available to you as a line manager?

All of the questions required the respondee to select their response from a pick list of possible answers.

Free text questions included:

- What are your current learning objectives?
- What do you see as the barriers to learning?

The research methods were delivered by the joint project team with inexperienced team members shadowing others as appropriate. The combination of methods, which largely ran in parallel, provided comprehensive qualitative and quantitative evidence. We interacted with a total research sample of over 400 line managers across four geographical regions, which encompassed a variety of different offices and business functions. The experience level of the line manager population ranged from less than 12 months to over 25 years and a significant proportion of the research population were actually line managers of managers.

**Research findings**

Some examples of the findings are summarized below. Where possible actual quotes from line managers were used to illustrate the findings. External evidence and benchmark data was inserted to enable meaningful comparisons with industry good practice, and to highlight themes and trends currently reported in learning and development studies and research papers. The findings from the action research sets and the online survey were analysed using a combination of numerical, thematic and coding analysis techniques.
When we asked managers to describe the challenges they faced in relation to learning and development. The most common responses were:

- The challenge of juggling priorities, balancing the needs of operational targets with staff management issues and personal and team development needs.
  
  “Conflicting priorities: Having to carry out the day job and keep up to date and participate in ongoing activities. This does not leave much time to devote to either personal or staff learning/development.”

- Problems dealing with HR issues. Many managers lacked the confidence/knowledge/skills to deal with complex HR issues such as discipline and grievance cases and absence management.

- The lack of awareness, understanding and knowledge of exactly what learning and development resource and support was available, and how managers could access it.
  
  “Knowing where to look, the processes to go through to obtain training etc. Opportunities not available when needed and budgets restricting opportunities.”

- How to motivate and inspire staff who are change-weary and show inertia and apathy towards personal development opportunities.

External research evidence from Ashridge Management School found that:

- Forty-five per cent of managers say they are under pressure to coach staff and learn new skills, but do not have the time or sufficient involvement from HR to be strategic about learning.

- Eighty two per cent of managers would like to have their own coach. (Ashridge Management School, 2004)

External research evidence confirms that the barriers to learning experienced within the central government department are widespread across many organizations and suggests that line managers need to witness good learning and development behaviours role modelled by their seniors to be able to see and experience first hand the benefits of taking time out of the day job to participate in learning activities.

Developing line managers’ skills and capability is an important prerequisite to enable managers to be more self-sufficient and rely less on corporate functions for support. By exploring managers’ personal learning goals and objectives we established the common development needs that existed within the line manager community. When line managers were asked to describe their current learning objectives their responses showed a range of skill and capability gaps, the most common of which were:

- To develop leadership and management skills
  
  “Improving my negotiating and influencing skills. Developing leadership skills.”

- To develop knowledge and skills within a new role
  
  “To consolidate learning to support new role, to develop strategic approach to work, to familiarise myself with the business area I support.”

When line managers were asked about their personal preferred mode of learning, the top responses were:

- On the Job/Experiential Learning (74%)
- Instructor-led Training (69%)
- Mixture of Methods (55%)
- Group-Based Learning (51%)
- Asking Colleagues/Line Managers (49%)
- Coaching (43%)

The results show that all of the preferred modes rely upon interaction with others and are facilitated and in some cases delivered by the line manager. This highlights the growing importance of the line manager’s role in learning. On the job/experiential learning was repeatedly cited as a highly valuable way of developing skills and knowledge. Managers were able to cite examples of learning by doing and how this had helped embed learning and make it real. For example:

“On the job training, shadowing and mentoring have been good learning experiences for me.”

“Nothing beats having to do something and making it work when you have no prior knowledge beforehand. Needing to ‘take the lid off’ and seeing how it works has been a great way of learning. For example understanding legislation and whips and ministers and how they think and work – there are no courses on that!”

When line managers were asked what was their primary role in supporting learning their responses were categorised as follows:
• Identifying learning needs (80%)
• Promoting a Learning Culture (64%)
• Coaching (56%)
• Mentoring (42%)
• Sourcing learning solutions (39%)

Research into Learning and Development by KnowledgePool found that:
• Formal learning accounts for only 20% of learning that takes place in an organisation. Effective support and encouragement from line managers can help promote informal learning opportunities to staff
• Training is wasted unless delegates have the opportunity to apply their learning soon afterwards and are supported by line managers
• Those people who could apply what they learned in their training reported performance improvement scores roughly double that of delegates who did not have that opportunity
• Line managers also play a pivotal role in supporting delegates following a training course or exercise. When support is in place, there is a much higher transfer of learning in the workplace, and the report shows that performance of delegates with line manager support was enhanced by around 30%. (KnowledgePool, 2006)

From the analysis we learnt that the role of the line manager in learning is a multidimensional one. They are required to spend time effectively giving learning support to staff, as well as making time for receiving learning support from others. In reality, it is a genuine challenge for line managers to balance their key work objectives with sufficient time for their own development and giving support to their people’s learning.

The research highlighted those managers who proactively drive learning and who are working very effectively with their teams, to equip them with the skills and knowledge that they need to deliver organizational success and develop their careers within the organization.

“I consider myself as an enabler for learning: identifying opportunities for individuals e.g. career path planning, identifying tools needed, competency tracking, technical skills etc.”

These managers balance organizational objectives with those of staff management and development. They also relish the opportunity to develop others and proactively identify opportunities that will encourage skill development and improved performance. There are managers who enable their staff to learn and identify potential learning opportunities that also support business need. The research also showed that there are those managers who are at best reactive enablers and at worst actual barriers to learning. They are unsupportive of learning and focus on short-term operational targets at the expense of longer term learning and development goals.

We learnt that line managers give credibility to learning solutions that:
• Involve human interaction.
• Are based on experiential learning with the support of a more experienced coach or mentor.
• Are linked to formal professional qualifications or accreditation.
• Are linked to organization objectives.

Our research concluded that improved recognition and support for the line manager’s role in learning is required to change the current mindset and to equip more managers with the required people development skills to coach and develop others. Many line managers had a real appetite for learning but found that their workload and other responsibilities took a higher business priority. Therefore, it is important to introduce and embed a different approach and culture around acceptance or credibility for learning and development time. This would enable line managers to have the time, resource and facilities to experience a range of learning and development activities that support their current role, but also contribute to their longer term career development. This approach would also support those experienced managers who are comfortable driving their own learning as well as those who require more proactive management support. This could also be further reinforced by linking learning to performance management and by ensuring that all staff have Key Work Objectives that relate to learning.

Best practice organisations recognise the strategic importance of organisational learning and development:
• 79% of best practice organisations integrate learning and development with employee performance management
• 75% integrate learning and development with assessments
• 62% have implemented a workforce coaching or mentoring programme
• 45% of executives participate in the organisation’s structured learning and development programme. (Martin, 2007)

The full research report provided a useful template for the project team to use in future research assignments. Case studies of good practice regarding the line manager's role in learning are providing invaluable insights and points of reference to managers across the department. The presentation outlining the key findings provided irrefutable evidence of the reality of the current situation and has been used to inform future developments and the learning and development strategy.

Concluding comments

The case study highlights how organizational research projects can provide practical insights and evidence that enable staff within organizations to make changes, improve processes and ways of working and/or take informed and confident decisions.

It is important to remember that work-based research projects should be pragmatic and forward-thinking. Whatever type of research project you undertake always ask yourself why you are doing it and what you hope to achieve. In the current organizational climate of extreme cost consciousness and efficiency gains, it is also important to think about the consequences of not doing it. This is a useful way to test its real importance. Consider the business implications of the research and how it will affect activities at the individual, team and organizational level.

Always look for the ‘so whats’ of your research. When analysing the findings it is not enough just to say – ‘60% of respondents did not access the Intranet on a regular basis’ – you have to get to the heart of the issue and look at the reasons behind what is happening. Only then can you take appropriate action to change it.

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