Editorial Preface:
In Support of Qualitative Information Systems Research

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INTRODUCTION

There is a growing community of researchers conducting global qualitative investigations in information systems (Tan & Gallupe, 2004). The members of this research community are interested in investigating research participants’ interpretations of phenomena. In situations where relatively little is know about an area under investigation, such as global research, qualitative approaches allow the researcher to conduct investigations to identify emerging themes. Qualitative researchers observe and document phenomena as they are interpreted by research participants. Of necessity, qualitative researchers work closely with research participants within their specific surroundings.

Various theories exist attempting to address cultural variability of global research. For instance, Karahanna et al. (2005) propose levels of culture which goes beyond the national purview to incorporate ethnic or religious groups and may extend to professional and organizational groups. Weisinger and Trauth (2003) proposed situating culture in locally grounded behaviours. Straub et al. (2002) have outlined theory-based measurement based upon Tajfel’s (1970, 1978) social identity theory regarding an individual’s perceptions of group membership. Also, Corbitt et al. (2004) have proposed a culture and code system which suggests that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckman, 1967) based upon a layered system of contextually dependent codes (Chandler, 2001). The perspective taken by these researchers is that information systems are fundamentally social rather than technical (Hirschheim, 1992; Lee, 2001).

This editorial presents a series of selected qualitative approaches for consideration by researchers. These approaches may be employed within the purview of the above theories to further our understanding of the subject area of information systems. The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of approaches that consider behavioural aspects (action research, case study, and ethnography) and those that consider cognitive aspects (personal construct theory and narrative inquiry).

BEHAVIOURAL APPROACHES

These approaches relate to the study of actions of individuals or groups. The emphasis here is upon identifying and documenting “shared patterns of behaviours”.
**Action Research**

When information systems are implemented, the result is some form of change. Action research facilitates investigating change and has been defined as, “...a continuous process of research and learning in the researcher’s long-term relationship with a problem” (Cunningham, 1993:4). The purpose of action research is to draw conclusions from a process of change. As the adoption of technology through the implementation of information systems facilitates change, action research may be considered appropriate for conducting investigations in this area.

**Case Study**

Case studies are empirical investigations of phenomena within a specific context in an attempt to understand the relationship between the phenomena and the context. The phenomena to be investigated may be an individual, a group, an organization; or an event such as the implementation of an information system.

**Ethnography**

This approach involves direct researcher observations conducted over a period of time. It involves exploring phenomena within its context and analyzing the interpretations of meanings attributed to the phenomena by the research participants. This approach may be employed to investigate information systems relative to their social aspects.

**COGNITIVE APPROACHES**

These approaches attempt to identify and understand the meanings or thought processes that initiate or sustain certain behaviours. The emphasis here is on identifying attitudes and beliefs that influence behaviour.

**Personal Construct Theory**

Qualitative researchers interested in investigating research participants’ interpretations may employ personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955, 1963). Kelly suggested that individuals develop a system of constructs which they employ in their efforts to interpret situations they encounter in their environment. A method for documenting research participants’ interpretations is the role construct repertory grid (or RepGrid). RepGrids generate a large amount of narrative explanations of a research participant’s interpretations. These explanations may be elaborated upon by the research participants through an approach known as “laddering” (Stewart & Stewart, 1981). Subsequent analysis may support the identification of themes across a number of similar research participants. Analysis of data gathered from different sets of research participants may be equally edifying. An overview of the technique and its application to the area of information systems has been presented by Tan and Hunter (2002).

**Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry entails the documentation of, “…events connected by subject and related by time” (Scholes, 1981:205). These events are contextually rich and temporally bounded. Stories that are contextually rich are personal experiences which are more vividly remembered (Tulving, 1972; Swap et al., 2001). Temporally bounded refers to a description of chronological events with a beginning and an end. Again, the
recitation of events based upon a sequence is more vividly remembered (Bruner, 1990; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Vendelo, 1998).

A data gathering technique which may be employed within narrative inquiry is the long interview technique (McCracken, 1988). To begin an interview, “grand tour” questions are asked which are general in nature. The interview is organized based upon “planned prompts” which relate to ideas or information gathered before the interview which relate to the area under investigation. “Floating prompts” may be employed when the research encounters a response which requires further elaboration by the research participant. The concept of floating prompt is similar to the process of laddering in that both are employed to gather more detailed comments about a research participant’s response.

CONCLUSION

This editorial has outlined some selected qualitative approaches for conducting global research in information systems. There are many more approaches that may be employed when conducting research in this area. The approaches discussed have been presented as a general overview. It is very important that the researcher thoroughly understand an approach to be adopted and why it is the most appropriate for the investigation about to be carried out.

As businesses expand their operations to more international situations and economies become increasingly global, it becomes incumbent upon both managers and academics to be cognizant of the variability of individuals and groups. This variability may be related to such aspects as race, ethnicity, as well as culture. The above approaches facilitate these types of investigations.

Finally, it is suggested that researchers not blindly adopt a research approach. The research approach should be based upon the research question and the objectives for conducting the research. Consideration of the approaches outlined here should be made in this light.

REFERENCES


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