

The Usefulness of Questionnaires in Carrying out research

Questionnaires are a set of written questions that are given to the respondent in the same order, so that the same information is collected and collated. There are several different types of questionnaires, like Structured interview questionnaires and Postal questionnaires, which can be used to evaluate people's opinions.

Questionnaires can be very useful in carrying out research, because questionnaires use quantitative data. Quantitative data is mainly about numbers and statistics, and it also usually involves a lot of respondents. The advantages of quantitative data are, with facts, figures and numbers, you can see trends and patterns. This kind of data can be analysed using computers. You could also use large samples and surveys. Quantitative data is also useful in carrying out research, because it can be reanalysed, so sociologists can use it again, therefore it is also reliable.

The most common type of questionnaire from which research is carried out, is the self-completion questionnaire given to people to fill in, usually in a work place or a school. Structured interview questionnaires are undertaken by trained researchers who guide respondents through the questions. This eliminates errors and misunderstandings. Postal questionnaires are mailed to respondents with a Stamped Addressed Envelope. This type of questionnaire is cheap and is sent to a large number of people over a large geographical area. Another type of questionnaire can be done over a phone. This is widely used by market researchers.

Questionnaires should be piloted previous to the answering in the real trials. Checks for reliability and validity are important, and once you have a good questionnaire, very often good results are produced. The results can be used to compare subjective opinions over different situations and development phases.

The types of questions used in questionnaires are Closed-ended and Open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions give an element of choice. They have a finite set of answers from which the respondent chooses. One of the choices may be 'Other'. It is an idea to allow respondents to write in an optional response if they choose 'Other'. The benefits of closed-ended questions are that they are easy to standardize, and data gathered from closed-ended questions lend themselves to

statistical analysis. Closed-ended questions in a questionnaire also take less time and they are inexpensive.

Open-ended questions are questions to which there is not one definite answer. Open-ended questions may be a good way in giving respondents an opportunity to answer in their own words, because open-ended questions allow for much more detail, and offer a lot more depth than closed-ended questions. The responses to open-ended questions can be very useful, often yielding quotable material.

To get useful responses from questionnaires, in a cost-effective way, it is important to be clear about the aim of the questionnaire and how the responses will help you. The analysis of results must also be thought about.

Questionnaires are a valuable information gathering tool when the investigator is clear about the information he or she wishes to obtain. In such circumstances, it is relatively easy to construct questions that produce clear responses. The responses are gathered in a standardised way, so questionnaires are more objective, certainly more so than interviews. Generally it is relatively quick to collect information using a questionnaire. Potential information can be collected from a large portion of a group. Return rates can be dramatically improved if the questionnaire is delivered and responded to straight away.

Overall questionnaires are very useful in carrying out research. They offer respondent anonymity, and they can be very good with qualitative data, because it is more objective, reliable and scientific as everyone is responding to the same questions. The results can be checked by other researchers and compared using the same methods. The data can be analysed so that new theories can be produced or old ones can be tested. Questionnaires are practical and easy to collate large numbers especially with the aid of computers, which would enable the researcher to isolate variables. Questionnaires are also an efficient use of time, and they can be carried out from a distance. The large numbers from questionnaires makes generalising about the whole population more acceptable.