

CONFERENCE REPORT

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2004 Qual-IT: The way forward; Qualitative research in IT & IT in qualitative research.

24-26th November 2004, Brisbane, Australia.

Amee Morgans

This conference was the 1st conference for the Qual-IT qualitative research and Information Technology group, which is comprised of representatives from qualitative social research fields and information technology companies. The conference was a two day event, preceded by some pre-conference opportunities for training in qualitative data analysis software programs. The conference was focussed on the collection and analysis of qualitative data and covered a range of technical and theoretical perspectives.

The conference topic areas encompassed methodological issues in data collection and analysis, human computer interaction and socio-technical issues. The conference was well attended, with approximately 100 delegates who attended from all areas of Australia and New Zealand and a couple of international visitors as well. The conference was structured to a concurrent session style, with three concurrent sessions interspersed with panel discussions and technical demonstrations of qualitative data analysis software programs. Most speakers were afforded a full half hour to speak and audience participation was welcomed.

The conference had several keynote presentations, the first of whom was a Professor of information systems from New Zealand, Michael Myers, who discussed the future of qualitative data analysis. Other keynote speakers were Dr Tom Richards, developer of Australia's most popular qualitative data analysis program QSR NVivo, Nudist and N6, who spoke on the actual process of analysing large amounts of textual or visual data such as video and interview transcripts. The final keynote speaker was Professor Eileen Trauth, who spoke about the role of the researcher in interpreting data and the impact of the researcher on the participant and the subsequent research outcomes. Professor Trauth emphasised the importance of the role of the researcher in interpreting human social interaction, and some strategies for evaluating qualitative social research.

Issues related to the validity of qualitative research were discussed, particularly case studies and textual data. How qualitative research should be interpreted in terms of the ability to generalise, and estimates of validity and reliability was also addressed. It was agreed that using a situation that has been experienced by a research participant as data is limited by the reliability of recall, and the different psychological processes both before and after the event such as rationalisation and the benefits of hindsight. However, it was also argued that the more we force rigour and quantification, the less likely we are to find the truth of a situation. Furthermore, the role of a case study in explaining the reality of a situation was discussed, and it was identified that the merits of a case study, no matter what size, are the extent to which details are adequate and suitable to inform someone in a similar situation. One way a case study should be used is to combine its reality with other data and research to paint a picture of the reality of a situation. It was concluded that the perceived value of qualitative research is determined by its interpretation and comparison with other research methods and study outcomes.

An excellent presentation demonstrating the innovative use of qualitative data was given by Jennifer Patashnick, who runs a video intervention prevention assessment program at the Children's Hospital in Boston (Patashnick & Rich, 2004). The purpose of this program was to improve communication between medical professionals and children living with a chronic illness. As part of the program, the patient is given a handheld video recorder and asked to record some interactions with family and friends in addition to some patient based monologues. The tape is sent back to the children's hospital and analysed by a team of qualitative researchers, and information about the patient's family support, illness attitudes and health behaviour is given to the treating doctors to help create a treatment plan that best suits the patient. This presentation emphasised the many uses of qualitative data, and was

reportedly well received by both patients and medical professionals dealing with children with chronic illness.

Another research issue that was presented was the difficulties of using qualitative data in traditionally quantitative environments. Two presentations dealt with this theme, one dealing with health information (Morgans, Allen, & Archer, 2004) and another presentation dealing with the military (Leoni Warne., Celina Pascoe, & Irena Ali., 2004). Methods of data source triangulation and transparent data analysis were emphasised as tools that can be used to support the strength of the qualitative data. Both presentations emphasised the role of "translating" the research methods and outcomes into the language that researchers and practitioners in the field can understand as being of paramount importance to the acceptance of the study outcomes.

A special conference session on E-health contained many interesting papers on different aspects of health information management and the health industry. The move towards the use of electronic medical records was also raised as a current issue, and the importance of the ability to records qualitative information such as comments, opinions and patient appearance was discussed. Also the issue of data collection, maintenance and privacy in an information intensive environment such as the health industry was explored.

This conference was of great benefit in terms of understanding how different data analysis methods can be used in research, and how good research planning and careful analysis can add value to many different research areas. The next Qual-IT Conference is scheduled for September 2006, and more information is available at; <http://www.qsr.com.au/events/events.asp> .