Case Study: Decision Explorer® as a research tool

Dr. Seonaidh McDonald is a lecturer in the International Business Strategy in the Management School at the University of Sheffield involved in management research into issues such as strategy making and innovation. Over the past four years Seonaidh has used Decision Explorer® extensively in her research as a tool for the management and analysis of qualitative data.

Seonaidh collects data through unstructured and semi-structured interviewing, as well as using techniques such as shadowing and observation. This generates huge amounts of unstructured data and handling it effectively can become a real problem. What is needed is a vehicle to help the transition from a wealth of raw data to a coherent account of the research, which will ultimately be used as a basis for feedback to the client and academic publications.

"*You need to get to know that data, to 'play' with it, to explore it, see what is there and draw out themes. Mapping gives a good non-linear, inter-linked summary of what the themes in an interview are. I need to see what I don't have, to contrast different peoples' views of what is real.*"

Part of the problem with qualitative research is how to get from this very rich account into a linear report. Decision Explorer® helps do this because is it not asking for a linear account. It allows you to spread your thoughts out on the page and build commentary in as you go along.

Another strength of using maps and Decision Explorer® is that you can use it as a tool with other researchers to give feedback and information about the data which has been gathered. A map provides a good focus if you are working in a research team, as not everyone can do, or be at, every interview. Sharing the data and developing your understanding of it can become an issue, so the maps can be used to overcome this. A map can be used to provide a manageable summary of the data, without losing the complexity of the data that the interviewee conveyed.

The theoretical framework that Seonaidh uses is Activity Theory. One of the important premises of Activity Theory is trying to represent the world in all of its complexity, "What I want my writing to show is how everything is inter-linked, how complex reality is, how different realities can exist together and it is very important to me to maintain but to understand that complexity. I don't want to 'black and white' this data all of a sudden, I don't want to degrade it". Mapping makes a good middle step between a 'mess' of raw data and a sophisticated account of research issues. At a later stage you can also examine the map for factors or relationships that are counter intuitive or are counter productive within the company. This can help you make recommendations to the client organisation.

Mapping helps you not only to highlight contrasting opinions but also to see them in context and to work with them. If someone tells you a story in a company about something that happened last week, and the next day someone else tells you another, different story about the same incident, they are different but they are both true. Qualitative research is full of this kind of contradiction. With mapping there is no need to privilege one account over another, you can have them both.

Seonaidh does not use mapping in a reflexive way with clients but uses it extensively for her own reflection and synthesis processes, "it is something that I use more on a private level -

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when I am trying to write, when I am thinking about what I want to say. If I am going round in circles and I don't know where to start and I can't write it, I map it instead! That is one of the greatest strengths of it. I find it quite natural to use. It helps to draw out the essence of the issues that I am trying to frame".

When you start to analyse the data there may be many themes that you could take out of the data and you could not possibly write them all up. Some of them can be preserved as maps, which is a quick way of capturing and holding on to ideas about the data as research notes which are not fully worked up, but contain enough detail to remind you what you were thinking about. Another kind of research account that mapping facilitates is keeping track of a subject that you are particularly interested in. "When I get comments from interviewees that particularly interest me and either confirm or contradict other opinions I start to make a map of them. I put quotes into the map and I use the memo cards to keep track of where the quotes have come from. I also add in quotes/references to literature. If I find resonance in two peoples' ideas I will use connotative links. It is often also appropriate to add in research team comments, so that we are starting to add reflection to the raw data".

"Before I discovered how to map, I used to fiddle about with an awful lot of bits of paper, and write notes up the side of things! Qualitative data is messy and so is qualitative data capture. People do not offer you a linear account or a logical argument. They often go off at tangents and remember things halfway through a story, which they should have told you at the beginning. Sometimes they contradict themselves. So therefore when you are writing a linear account about the data you are continually debating with yourself 'should I put this in here?' With a map you can fit it all in. You can see how things relate to one another. With mapping it also feels easier to try different things than it is with a written report. Qualitative data analysis is an iterative process. Sometimes print is 'too fixed' and it feels like it is hard to change, to edit and come up with new ideas: you don't get that with maps."

Later in the research process you get the problem of translating your reflections about the data into a formal report. "Before I started using mapping I would have gone straight from interview transcripts to notes for a paper/ report. That's a big jump! Conceptually that is quite a hard thing to do and you do not always do justice to the data by doing that. The process of mapping gives you time to consolidate your thinking, it is an extra stage of reflection. If you want, it can be systematic reflection. So I also use mapping for report structuring."

Seonaidh generally builds two kinds of maps: living maps and data maps. A data map is a 'faithful' representation of a conversation. It is a research record and it won't change. You can have other maps that grow out of it as you compare data maps and you can have analysis and comment that overlay it. These are the living maps, which will, almost inevitably, change over time as the map owners' understanding evolves.

Summing up, Decision Explorer® provides you with the power to manage the complexity of your data and gives you the freedom to work with it in a number of different ways.

For further information about Decision Explorer® and how it can help your business, please contact:

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