



THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITATIVE METHODS IN AN EXPLORATORY BUSINESS RESEARCH: A CASE STUDY FROM PUNJAB, INDIA

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Abstract: *The paper outlines the application of Qualitative Research techniques in an Exploratory Business Research. It is considered to discuss a practical approach of qualitative research methodology based on a case study. The problem focused is regarding the development and implementation process of corporate vision of manufacturing sector SMEs of Ludhiana district of Punjab, India. The research design provides for guidelines to utilize the data collection instruments, measurement techniques and tools for data analysis. The importance of qualitative techniques in different stages of the research is discussed with the assistance of theoretical and empirical research findings.*

Keywords: *Qualitative Methods, Exploratory Research, Inductive Reasoning, Purposive Sampling, In-depth Interviews, Content Analysis*

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INTRODUCTION

Business research is a systematic investigation which provides information to get managerial decisions. It is a process of planning, collecting, analyzing and interpreting relevant data, information and perceptions to make appropriate decisions regarding organizational issues. Therefore the results of business research can be used to improve organizational performances. Not only business research but also any kind of research should be based on sound reasoning to find correct premises, test the connections between facts and assumptions, make claims based on relevant and satisfactory evidences etc. According to the sound reasoning, business research can be divided into two as quantitative research and qualitative research. As the result of the strong relationship between reasons and conclusions, many business researchers prefer to follow quantitative techniques. Generally qualitative techniques are much popular among social science researchers. (Cooper and Schindler, 2008)

Qualitative research techniques aim to achieve an in-depth understanding about a situation or process which has not been previously researched or partially researched. These techniques are used at both the data collection and data analysis stages of a research. The array of techniques such as focus groups, individual depth interviews, case studies, grounded theory and ethnography are used at the data collection stage. On the other hand, content analysis, Thematic coding and Grounded theory approach will be used as qualitative data analysis methods. (Cooper and Schindler, 2008; Flick, 2009)

There are some criticisms over the qualitative research techniques. (Bryman and Bell, 2007)

1. Qualitative research findings too much rely on the researcher's unsystematic opinions about what is significant and important.
2. Qualitative research findings are difficult to replicate because it is unstructured and often reliant upon the researcher's ingenuity.
3. It is impossible to know how the findings can be generalized to other similar instances.
4. In some instances it is difficult to understand what the researcher actually did and how he/she made conclusions about the study.

According to the requirements and nature of the study, qualitative studies can be designed to reduce these problems up to a maximum level. Bryman and Bell (2007) have discussed some advantages are involving with a qualitative research than a quantitative research. In a



quantitative research, a researcher is distant when collecting data but researcher is much closed with participants in the qualitative research. Quantitative researchers highly concern about how generalize research findings whereas the qualitative researcher seeks an understanding about reality of a phenomenon. Quantitative researchers make artificial settings in the environment when collecting data but qualitative researchers investigate people natural environments.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

This research paper discusses the importance of qualitative methods in a business research and how to use them practically. It is not going to discuss findings of the research but it focuses on research methodology throughout the research paper. Therefore a business research was developed as a case study to discuss above matters.

In order to examine the usefulness of qualitative techniques, the researcher formulates a business research which aims to examine development and implementation process of the corporate vision at manufacturing sector enterprises of Ludhiana district of Punjab. Only Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are considered for this investigation. Even though many of researches have been done in the area of corporate visioning, majority of them were limited to the large conglomerates. As per the general view, SMEs do not take considerable attempts to follow well-developed and standardized business procedures likewise large companies. Therefore corporate vision of SMEs has not been recognized as an interesting topic among the researchers.

If a researcher has a lack of knowledge about the problems they will meet during the study, an exploratory study is the most suitable investigation method. Exploratory studies are more heavily relied on qualitative techniques. (Cooper and Schindler, 2008) Due to corporate vision of Indian SMEs were not properly researched, an exploratory research is designed to achieve above mentioned objectives. As this study is based on qualitative research techniques, inter-relationship between different stages of the corporate vision development and implementation processes will be explained by written representations.

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

There are various models have been introduced and practiced on how to develop and implement vision under the strategy executing process of an organization. Therefore it can be identified a prescriptive nature about the vision in literature. However there will be some



practical problems when operationalizing these theories, because level of the investment, organizational structure as well as leadership style of the owners will be directly affected to that. On other hand, most of these theories were introduced in developed countries. Therefore, it will make some practical difficulties when applying these theories on a developing country such as India.

Here it was developed the research question as “How do SMEs in manufacturing sector of Punjab develop and implement their vision”. Considering with feasibility of the research the area was delimited to the Ludhiana district of Punjab because it is much industrialized than other districts. Under this research question, it is investigated and examined the owners’ viewpoints about the corporate vision and methodologies what they have followed in order to develop and implement the corporate vision. The theoretical knowledge about corporate vision can be developed and improved through this practical understanding. Therefore this study follows the inductive approach to make an exploratory investigation. Inductive approach is more qualitative in nature and generally emphasizes words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

According to Frankel and Devers (2013), research question of a qualitative research should be clearly stated. In addition to that it should be made a clear explanation on how this research question is emerged with investigator’s perceptions and assumptions. Research question of this study has three main aspects.

1. How do owners of SMEs recognize the concept of corporate vision with its importance?
2. How do SMEs develop their vision?
3. How do SMEs implement their vision through strategic planning process?

Under the first question, it will be tested owner’s opinion about the corporate vision. Furthermore, their personal views regarding why they should keep a vision is discussed here. Second sub question is directly related to the development process of the corporate vision. Under that strategic focus of the vision, strategic tool which were used to develop that, the place where vision was developed, how long ago it came into the practice and different parties involved to this process will be deeply studied. Third question is formulated to identify the process that SMEs follow to implement their corporate vision. The importance of other strategic management techniques such as mission, goals, objectives,



corporate values and strategies as well as the concept of sharing vision are taken into the account here.

FORMULATION OF HYPOTHESES

As this study is based on qualitative research techniques, inductive analysis has been used for the research reasoning. Inductive analysis enables the researcher to design the research without prior hypotheses (Best and Kahn, 2006). Under this approach, the researcher can draw a conclusion from one or more particular facts of evidence. Finally conclusion explains the facts as well as facts support the conclusion (Cooper and Schindler, 2008).

This area has not been previously researched in India. Without proper knowledge regarding the practical situations, it cannot be made prior assumptions about the findings. Making hypotheses based only on theoretical knowledge cannot be recommended to the exploratory studies because it will make barriers to discover reality. Therefore this study begins by exploring genuinely open questions about the corporate vision of SMEs rather than testing theoretically derived hypotheses.

POPULATION, SAMPLE SIZE AND SAMPLING METHOD

Population of the research consist 162,559 small 67 medium enterprises in the manufacturing sector of Punjab (pbindustries,2013).

Exploratory qualitative researches most often use purposive sampling rather than random sampling techniques. These sampling strategies are designed to enhance the level of understanding of selected individuals in order to develop concepts or theories. For that, researchers should select “information rich” cases which can be provided greatest comprehension into the research question (Frankel and Devers, 2000).

According to Miles and Huberman (1994), three types of cases have the greatest payoff in purposive samples:

1. Typical or normal cases
2. Deviant or extreme cases
3. Negative cases

In addition to above three, Patton (2002) suggested other several cases that can be considered in the purposive sampling: cases which are selected as per intensity, critical cases, sensitive cases and convenience cases. According to Flick (2009) random sampling is most restricted than purposive sampling. However, most critical problem in an exploratory



study is how to access to the problem with least barriers. Therefore purposive sampling was selected for this study.

As a sample, 30 SMEs were selected from Ludhiana district. In order to generalize the results, priority has been given to the typical cases. Time limit, flexibility and convenience were considered as major factors when deciding the sample size, because all the interviews have to be conducted with decision makers (CEOs, Partners, Proprietors or Directors) of selected organizations. It is not an easy task to make appointments with owners of commercial organizations. Therefore sample size was limited to 30 SMEs.

SOURCES OF DATA

This study is based on primary data as well as secondary data in connection with outline objectives. The primary data was collected through in-depth interviews and Secondary data was collected from published sources such as concerned websites, various company reports and journals.

As an exploratory research technique, in-depth interviews are conducted because interviewer should grab spontaneous responses of the interviewee regarding a specific topic. It is like a conversation. This technique can be used at the situations where interviewer has some specific topics which were not previously researched but have to be covered under his investigation in order to generalize the knowledge. Therefore in-depth interviews were conducted with an assistance of a research guide.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

In-depth interview is the major data collection method in this research. Interviews can be used to understand the cognitive models of people regarding their worldviews with general beliefs, attitudes and expectations. It is recommended and widely used technique by journalists and public opinion researchers (Krippendorff, 2004). There is an opportunity with face-to-face interviews for follow up by probing. If a respondent's answer is unclear, the researcher may ask more clear and comprehensive questions in order to obtain a meaningful explanation (Zikmund, 2003).

According to Flick (2009), there are three types of questions can be made on the topical areas which are included in the interview guide.

1. Open questions – These questions may be answered on the basis of existing knowledge with the interviewee.



2. Theory-driven questions – These questions are based on researcher's theoretical knowledge and presuppositions.
3. Confrontational questions – Under these type of questions, interviewee's practical knowledge can be critically evaluated with the assistant of relevant theories in order to make much reality to the interview process.

The respondents were contacted via telephone to setup time for the interview. All the interviews were conducted at their business premises. The interviews approximately an hour each with 30 owners (CEOs/ Managing Partners/ Proprietors) interviewed.

According to Frankel and Devers (2000), generally three factors are influenced the degree of structure or type of instrumentation used in an exploratory study.

1. Purpose of the study
2. The extent of existing knowledge about the research question
3. The resources available, particularly time frame and complexity of cases

Above factors were considered when preparing an interview guide but questions which have not been included in the guide. Key themes abstracted from the literature review regarding the research objectives, were included in the research guide. However it was more careful when conducting interviews, because understanding levels might be different from respondent to respondent. The Interview guide is shown in Annexure 1.

Each session of interviews lasted around forty minutes. Approximately 23 hours of interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim. This transcribed data was considered for the data analysis.

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE PRE-TESTING

The interview schedule design phase was followed by a pilot phase in order to measure effectiveness of the interviews. For pre-testing the interview schedule, trial runs were carried out with two representative respondents selected on a convenience basis. The results of this process allowed the researcher to determine the level of understanding about the subject matters and practical applications. Interview process and questions were formulated according to the data collected by the pre-testing.

MEASUREMENT TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS FOR DATA ANALYSIS

It can be identified three major challenges in the qualitative data analysis. (Best & Kahn, 2006)



1. How to reduce the volume of information?
2. How to identify significant patterns?
3. How to construct a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal?

Therefore qualitative researchers should identify general statements about relationships and underlying themes. As a result of large corpus of unstructured textual material, qualitative data are not straightforward to analyze. It has not been developed clear-cut rules regarding the qualitative data analysis and different techniques have to be followed according to the volume and nature of data (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

In this research, content analysis was conducted on data obtained from the interviews. Content analysis is one of the classical procedures for analyzing qualitative data (Flick, 2009). Under this approach, the data collected through interviews will be analyzed for common themes cited by different respondents.

According to Flick (2009), following steps should be followed in the content analysis.

1. Definition of the material
2. Analyzing the situation
3. Formal classification of the material
4. Research questions have to be differentiated on the basis of theories
5. Developing themes according to the data and respective theories
6. Summary, Explication and Structuration
7. Reassess the themes against theory and data
8. Interpretation of the results according to the main research questions

Coding or developing themes is the most crucial stage in the content analysis. For that, researcher should have a good theoretical knowledge about research questions and practical applications of the same. In order to overcome some potential dangers, researcher should highly concern about following matters: Dimensions should entirely separate, mutually exclusive categories should not overlap, all possible categories should be available in codes and coders should have knowledge about how to interpret data (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Content analysis is a very transparent and flexible method that can be used to analyze unstructured or semi-structured data.



The data recorded during the interviews was summarized under the common themes as per the requirements of the content analysis. In the initial stage of this analysis, a row data table was created including all the individual responses. This stage facilitated to make an easy and meaningful analysis under the common themes in the next stage. The unstructured tabulated data was then inspecting under the common coding or themes and the table was modified by replacing similar coded responses with a specific construct. For example interviewee's responses of "vision makes the future of the organization" and "It says about our future status" were grouped into the construct "Vision is future oriented".

After the data analysis, researcher can make a discussion regarding the research findings. That discussion should be based on major three aspects of the corporate vision which were considered under the research problem. As this is an exploratory research, researcher can generalize his findings in order to make a model or process that can be used to development and implementation of corporate vision. Finally, limitations of the research should be revealed with suggestions for future researchers.

CONCLUSION

The qualitative research methods are emerging and can be considered for business researches. However, in many instances, business researchers do not prefer to follow these qualitative techniques due to their practical problems over generalizing the findings. Qualitative research methods are based on inductive reasoning and it is not encouraged to develop hypothesis regarding the research problem. Theories can be developed on qualitative research findings because they cover vast area of the research problem in different aspects.

The methods used for data collection such as In-depth interviews are helpful where detailed information is required and nature of the research is exploratory as in the above case. So the data analysis is done through content analysis while dealing with unstructured data. The importance of all qualitative methods which were used in this research has been critically evaluated with the assistance of relevant literatures. Finally it can be concluded that qualitative research methods are very useful in business researches, especially for exploratory investigations where need to grasp an in-depth understanding on research problem.



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ANNEXURE 01

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Main research Areas	Sub sections
General Information about the respondents	Current position of the respondents (interviewees)
	Respondents' (interviewees') number of years of the current position
	Highest qualification of respondents (interviewees)
	Classification of respondents (SMEs) according to the investment in plant and machineries
	Number of years from establishment
	Classification of SMEs according to the manufacturing products
	Legal background of the enterprises
How do owners' of SMEs define their vision?	Whether SMEs have a vision
	Respondents' opinions regarding the vision
	Respondents' opinions regarding the importance of corporate vision
	Reasons for some SMEs do not have a vision
Development of Corporate vision	Whether SMEs have a vision statement
	Completeness of the vision statement
	Strategic focus of the vision
	The time when vision was incepted and changes and modifications of it
	The situation when the vision was developed
	Factors consider before formulate of the vision (Internal & External)
	Strategic tools used to develop the vision
	The place where vision was developed
	Different parties involved in the vision development process



	Respondent's opinions regarding the vision development process
Implementation of the Corporate Vision	The level of sharing vision associate with each party
	Availability of strategic management instruments
	Availability of a long term business plan
	Status of corporate values of the organization
	Key strategic management tools used in the strategic planning
	Strategic planning versus execution level of difficulty
	Respondents' opinion regarding the strategy executing process
	Availability of monitoring tools
	Corrective actions