Maximising telephone survey participation in international HRD research

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SUMMARY (50 words)

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on improving survey response, focussing upon ways of tailoring the survey design to leverage potential respondents' decision to participate; and uses a case study to examine an application of leverage saliency theory. Techniques likely to be effective in maximising telephone survey participation in HRD research are detailed.

INTRODUCTION

Telephone surveys offer Human Resource Development (HRD) researchers a valuable means of collecting data using an interviewer administered questionnaire to ask a large number of people the same pre-determined questions. Such surveys are particularly suited for collecting data from specified specialist target populations (such as people within organisations) providing they are accessible by telephone (Saunders et al., 2012). Where non-respondents differ systematically from respondents this may distort the data resulting in 'non-response' bias (Couper et al., 1999) and a possible threat to validity. Although any rate of non-response can result in bias, there is a general consensus that higher response rates lead to a higher probability of those responding representing the entire sample and thus the population from which it is drawn (Baruch and Holtom, 2008). Conversely low response rates increase the likelihood of not being able to generalise the findings of the study to the entire sample, undermining the conclusions drawn about the population. As with all surveys, there is a need to maximise participation from potential respondents to help ensure validity of their findings. Despite this need to maximise responses, researchers acknowledge an increasing problem since the late 20th Century of declining respondent participation in surveys, particularly those administered by telephone (Dillman, 2009; Wright and Marsden, 2010). Potential participants have not only become more difficult to contact, but once contacted are often reluctant to participate (Singer, 2010). This spectre of non-response, and the associated possibility of bias, raises two key issues for HRD researchers using this data collection method: first, the extent to which a range of factors influence response rates in various contexts and, second, what can be done to maximise participation in various contexts (Dillman, 2000; Roth and BeVier, 1998).

Within HRD survey research, there has also been considerable concern about the implications of the sample who respond and the implications of this for the reliability of findings (Gerhart et al., 2000). This becomes particularly important where an employee sub group who are likely to rate things differently to other employees, or have privileged information on which to base their responses, are selected as respondents. For example, unlike some other employees, HR and HRD specialists may use industry standards to rate their own organisation's HRD practices, financial performance or competitiveness. In contrast line managers and other employees may not have access to such industry information, resulting in very different responses and, ultimately, research findings (Sheehan, 2012b). Dependent upon the research being undertaken, there may be a need to ensure HR specialists, line managers and other employees are all selected and participate within a study (Guest and Conway, 2011; Mabey, 2008; Sheehan, 2012a and 2012b). Whilst the use of such 'multi-respondent' approaches can help to address low reliability of a single group's responses, as we shall illustrate later, it adds additional complexity when trying to generalise from responses.

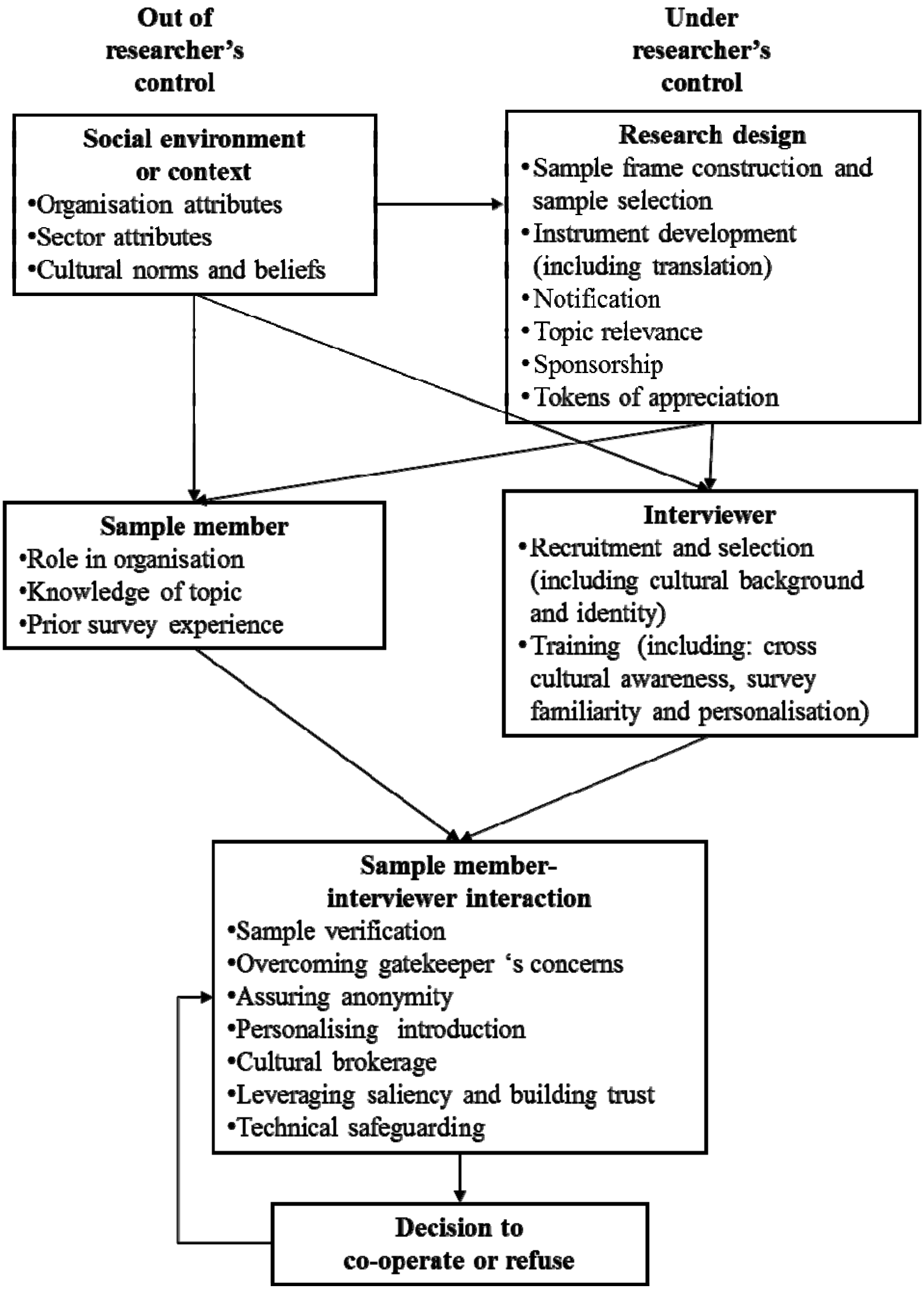
Given the above, it is not surprising that a considerable amount of research has been undertaken regarding the importance and how to maximise response rates. Much of this research is concerned with testing the effect of one factor (for example offering a particular incentive) with a specified group (for example employees) for a specified delivery type (usually by mail) (Groves et al., 2000). Although such analyses have increased our understanding regarding why the specified groups may respond to particular participation requests and the factors likely to increase their participation rates, the groups researched seldom include managers or senior executives. In addition telephone questionnaires, despite their continued widespread use for special target populations such as clients and employees of organisations (Lavarakas, 2010; Wang and Saunders, 2012), are rarely considered in this discussion; notable exceptions being Anseel et al. (2010) and Baruch and Holtom (2008).

In this chapter we commence by providing an overview of the literature on improving survey response, focussing upon ways of tailoring the survey design to leverage potential respondents' decision to participate; an application of leverage saliency theory. The practice of this is then explored using work undertaken by one of us, Maura Sheehan, to research the relationship between HRD and performance in United Kingdom (UK) owned subsidiaries. We conclude with those techniques likely to be effective in maximising telephone survey participation in HRD research.

LEVERAGING THE DECISION TO PARTICIPATE

Potential survey respondents' decisions to participate are, for all survey types, argued to be based on factors that are out of, and factors that are under, the researcher's control (Couper and Groves, 1996). Factors out of the researcher's control comprise the social environment, which creates the climate in which the survey is undertaken, and attributes of the sample selected to take part. Factors under the researcher's control include all aspects of survey design and each interviewer's characteristics. Although developed initially for household surveys, this framework has been subsequently revised in relation to telephone questionnaires (Wang and Saunders 2012), to create a 'framework' for cooperation in (cross cultural) telephone questionnaires (Figure 1). It is this framework we now consider.

Figure 1: A framework for cooperation in telephone surveys


Out of researcher's control
Under researcher's control
Social environment or context
•Organisation attributes
•Sector attributes
•Cultural norms and beliefs
Research design
•Sample frame construction and sample selection
•Instrument development (including translation)
•Notification
•Topic relevance
•Sponsorship
•Tokens of appreciation
Sample member
•Role in organisation
•Knowledge of topic
•Prior survey experience
Interviewer
•Recruitment and selection (including cultural background and identity)
•Training (including: cross cultural awareness, survey familiarity and personalisation)
Sample member-interviewer interaction
•Sample verification
•Overcoming gatekeeper 's concerns
•Assuring anonymity
•Personalising introduction
•Cultural brokerage
•Leveraging saliency and building trust
•Technical safeguarding
Decision to co-operate or refuse

With regard to factors that influence participation *outside* the researcher's control, Couper and Groves (1996) and Lynn (2008) both argue that the social environment is likely to influence potential respondents' reactions to requests to participate. Within organisational and HRD research these include attributes of the organisation and the sector, as well as cultural, social and environmental norms and beliefs within which they operate (Wang and Saunders, 2012). For organisational research, the characteristics of the organisation members selected for the sample, such as their role within the organisation, are also influences (Anseel et al., 2010). Their knowledge of the research topic and its relevance to their work (Groves et al., 2004), their past experiences of involvement in questionnaires and their psychological predisposition to respond (Dillman, 2009) are also likely to affect participation.

Factors influencing participation which are *under* the researcher's control are wide ranging, relating both to the research design (Couper and Groves, 1996; Lynn, 2008) and, of crucial importance to telephone surveys, the interviewer (Schaeffer et al., 2010). With regard to research design, influencing factors include the perceived relevance of the topic to potential respondents, definition of the sampling frame and sample selection techniques used, use of advanced notice, the time of day administered, incentives to participate, assurances of anonymity, and external (university) sponsorship (Anseel et al., 2010; de Leeuw et al., 2007; Dillman, 1978, 2009; Saunders et al., 2012). Questionnaire design, including the length, will also influence participation, sample members being less likely to participate if questionnaires are long or administered at inconvenient times. Design features which are likely to increase participation in telephone surveys are summarised by Dillman (1978) in his 'Total Design Method', a forerunner of his (2009) 'Tailored Design Method' that focuses upon mail and web surveys. This incorporates careful survey design, including use of an advance letter (if possible) and a short introduction by explaining who is calling, what is requested, why the respondent should take part and a conservative estimate of the time required. Dillman (1978) argues the latter is enhanced by university sponsorship that emphasises the importance of the research. However, our research indicates that emphasising academic links or sponsorship by a university (Wang and Saunders, 2012) or an organisation such as the European Union (Sheehan, 2013) may not enhance responses in some contexts.

Telephone surveys necessitate using at least one "interviewer" to ask the questions and record responses. Her or his cultural sensitivity and abilities, including where necessary foreign language skills, along with training, invariably impact upon subsequent interaction with potential participants. Prior to the start of the formal administration, s/he will need to establish contact with sample members, undertake screening and, where suitable, invite participation, introduce the research, offer assurance of anonymity and answer initial queries. Not surprisingly, clarity of the interviewer's voice and ability to read questions fluently are essential (Dillman, 1978). Although the introduction to telephone questionnaires is usually less than a minute duration, it is crucial in obtaining potential respondents' agreement to take part (Schaeffer et al., 2010). Response rates are likely to be enhanced where (experienced) interviewers are given freedom to personalise the questionnaire introduction, offering convincing assurances of anonymity and persuading the organisational member to participate (de Leeuw et al., 2007; Houtkoop-Steenstra and Van Den Bergh, 2000) in their own words, albeit from a specified agenda. The decision to participate is therefore based upon interacting influences, some facilitating and others constraining cooperation, thereby influencing response rates.

Leverage-saliency theory (Groves and Couper, 1998) argues that during this brief interaction where the interviewer requests a sample member to participate, the interviewer can observe the potential respondent's "idiosyncratic concerns" (Groves et al., 2000: 299) and tailor the request to participate accordingly. Through tailoring, the interviewer attempts to heighten the salience or prominence of those aspects of the research judged likely to be most favourably received by each respondent. A specific research topic may have positive leverage for individuals who are generally interested in a topic and a negative leverage for those who are not (Groves et al., 2000). Features considered to have positive leverage as they make the questionnaire more appealing can be highlighted. Conversely those features that make the survey less appealing have negative leverage and need to be neutralised. For example, an incentive such as a gift voucher might be judged to have positive leverage whilst a long interview is likely to have a negative leverage.

Leverage-saliency theory assumes that a potential respondent has an expected utility for participating, only agreeing to participate if this expected utility is greater than other uses of her/his time and effort. Whether an attribute has a positive or negative salience will vary across sample persons. A telephone questionnaire may provide a financial incentive and appeal to civic duty (which could include, in the context of HRD research, a sense of responsibility to the potential respondent's employer). However, the interviewer may emphasise only one of these aspects, thereby increasing or decreasing its leverage, depending on the characteristics of the potential respondent and their idiosyncratic responses to the initial dialogue (Groves et al., 2000). Alternatively, research on an HRD topic such as the value of training to the organisation may have high topic saliency to both HR managers and specialists whereas this may be low for other employees (also potential respondents) who are more concerned regarding the value to themselves. Tailoring the introduction to the research to each group by emphasising different aspects of the research is likely to increase participation. Leverage-saliency theory, therefore, provides a model of how interviewers may increase the likelihood of each potential respondent agreeing to take part (Maynard et al., 2010). It also emphasises the pivotal role of interviewers in telephone surveys, assessing how each respondent will be influenced by individual response enhancing techniques (Anseel et al., 2010) and customising their remarks accordingly.

We now consider the application of leverage saliency theory to telephone surveys within HRD research. Within this we focus upon those aspects under the researcher's control: research design and the pivotal role of the interviewer; and the associated interaction between each sample member and the interviewer administering the telephone questionnaire.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF LEVERAGING TELEPHONE SURVEY PARTICIPATION

In this section, we reflect on the use of a telephone questionnaire in a European Union funded study undertaken by one of us (Sheehan, 2012a). This examined the relationship between HRD and the organisational performance in the context of UK multinationals with subsidiaries in Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. Maura was concerned particularly with strategic management development, its diffusion within multinational corporations, and the performance of domestic and foreign subsidiaries. Using data collected through a large scale interviewer-administered questionnaire she explored the process of management development, in particular best practice and top management support, and its impact upon subsidiary performance. Her analysis tested whether the outputs of management development (such as line managers' perceptions of the importance and provision of management development) were associated with subsidiaries' performance (for example financial performance, employee turnover, innovation rates). We commence with research design issues, which were under Maura's (the researcher) control.

Survey design issues

Sample frame construction and sample selection

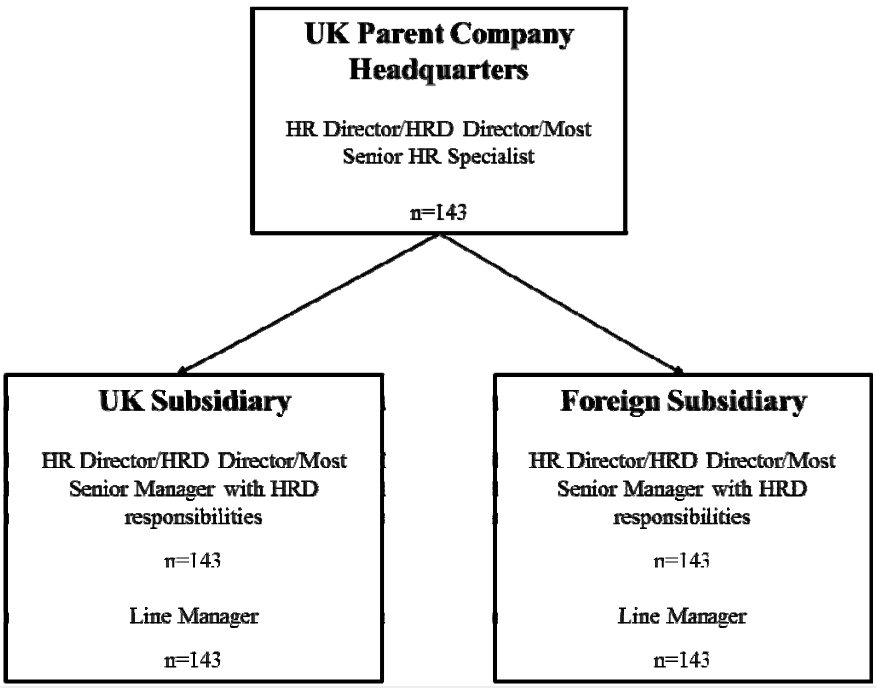
Within HRD research involving both HR specialists and others there is, as highlighted in our introduction, the potential for a divergence of perspectives and, as a consequence, low reliability of responses are collected only from a single-rater group (Gerhart et al., 2000). For this reason a multi-respondent approach to data collection was needed necessitating a sampling frame of UK owned subsidiaries within which data from HR Directors, HR managers and specialists and line managers could be collected.

The population from which Maura selected her sample comprised Dun and Bradstreet's Global Reference Solution database. This is one of the most comprehensive and detailed sources for information on complex companies (Henriques, 2009). Initially, a purposive criterion based sample of 515 subsidiaries was drawn from the database using the criteria relating to the 'global ultimate parent company'. Specifically the parent company:

- was in the UK, thereby eliminating potential 'country of origin' effects;
- employed at least 200 people overall (thereby facilitating comparison with other large scale survey data that used this criterion such as Cranet (Steinmetz et al., 2011);
- had a subsidiary in at least one of three study countries (i.e., Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland).

Within these subsidiaries, Maura gave priority to the 378 subsidiaries whose ultimate parent company also had a similar subsidiary in the UK. This, she argued, would ensure the data she collected from the headquarters and from the UK and foreign country subsidiaries were not affected by within company differences between the subsidiaries. Although this was time consuming, it was essential as HRD interventions within each company's subsidiaries were considered likely to vary according to the nature of work undertaken within a particular subsidiary.

Figure 2: The Study Design & Sample Respondents



The research design used critical case matched samples for each parent company and the UK and the foreign subsidiary (Figure 2) thereby allowing specific company-wide HR interventions to be assessed within their subsidiaries. Each matched sample comprised of the HR or HRD Director or the most senior HR specialist in the parent company headquarters (1 person) and, for both the UK and the foreign country subsidiaries of that company, the HR or HRD Director or the most senior HR specialist and a line manager (two people in each).

Instrument development (including translation)

The telephone questionnaire, developed originally in English, allowed for a structured interview format for data collection (Saunders et al., 2012). Although not the focus of this chapter, it is worth noting that the questions that Maura developed were influenced by previous research on the relationship between management development and perceived subsidiary performance. Research highlights that potential respondents are significantly more likely to respond to surveys in their native language (Harzing et al., 2012). Consequently, once questions had been developed and pilot tested, the English language questionnaire was translated into the native language of each foreign subsidiary to maximise linguistic saliency. Translation used a mixed techniques process involving translation and back translation by two independent native speaking translators with expertise in management related disciplines. Each translation was then adjusted by collaboration and interaction (Douglas and Craig, 2007) with practitioners to ensure that, within that foreign language version, conceptual and functional equivalence of meaning was maintained (Harpaz, 1996; Cascio, 2012). Reasons for any discrepancies that emerged were discussed and addressed.

Paper versions of the translated questionnaires were pilot tested initially on master's level students with HR/HRD and managerial expertise from each of the four study countries. These individuals subsequently participated in a focus group where question wording was further adjusted to account for cultural, linguistic and organisational characteristics in each of the study countries. The telephone questionnaires were then pilot tested in three companies in each of the four countries. This pilot testing was undertaken by the interviewers employed for the research and resulted in further minor amendments to question wording and order. It also provided a training opportunity for the interviewers.

The questionnaires used therefore ensured lexical, idiomatic and experiential meanings were consistent between the versions for the four countries. This was noted by the interviewers who commented that the culturally specific nuances within the questions, reflecting the collaborative and interactive approach used in this survey's translation, helped them to enhance cultural bonding with their interviewees, especially the line managers.

Notification, sponsorship and tokens of appreciation

Customised advanced survey notification was sent to each HR/HRD Director at corporate headquarters, in the main by email. Each advance notification included at least one personalised item of "good news" about the parent company derived from that company's Annual Report or their web pages. The notification also emphasised relevance, in particular, how the organisation might use the study findings including effectively demonstrating the value added by the HR function thereby leveraging salient issues. To further leverage participation potential headquarter respondents were informed that they would receive a summary of the research findings, and that a £50 donation would be made in their name to a charity of their choice. The notification acknowledged that the project was funded by the European Union; that the primary investigator was a Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellow; and that the research was supported by the UK Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD).

Potential participants in each subsidiary received similar information in their notifications, although with differing emphases. Pre-survey consultation with line managers in subsidiaries had indicated that enriching and improving the relevance of Human Resource Development interventions was important (salient), so this was emphasised for these potential participants. For Polish subsidiary companies Maura's Marie *Skłodowska* Curie fellowship was emphasised, highlighting Curie's Polish origins. In the overseas subsidiaries, EU sponsorship seemed to have very positive leverage, although this did not appear to be so for the UK subsidiaries.

Response rates differed between those at company headquarters (52.6%), HR personnel in the UK and foreign subsidiaries (45.6% and 42.3% respectively) and line managers in the UK and foreign subsidiaries (40.4% and 38.2% respectively). Despite this, telephone questionnaires were completed by all five respondents for 143 parent companies and their two subsidiaries, a response rate of 37.8%. In addition to the 143 of these subsidiaries based in the UK, 57 were based in Poland, 46 in the Czech Republic and 40 in Hungary.

The Role of the Interviewers

Recruitment and selection

It is generally recognised that interviewer skills are instrumental in increasing response rates and generating reliable and valid responses for telephone surveys (Schaeffer et al., 2010; Wang and Saunders, 2012). Consequently it is important that care is given to their recruitment and selection (Dillman, 1978). For Maura's research it was crucial that the interviewer had the necessary language skills and a high level of cultural awareness in relation to potential respondents (Harzing et al., 2012).

Within her research, Maura commissioned a professional research firm with vast experience of international telephone survey research to administer the telephone questionnaires using native speakers. This meant each questionnaire for a foreign subsidiary would be administered in that country's language by a native speaker who negotiated access to the respondent.

Training

All the professional research firm's interviewers were already experienced. Consequently it was not necessary to train them in standard 'best practice protocol', other than ensuring each was familiar with the survey. Pilot testing of the questionnaires in each of the four countries (outlined earlier) allowed the interviewers to familiarise themselves with the survey in a 'real world' simulation. In addition Maura briefed the interviewers about the objectives of her study, explaining the precise meaning of terminologies used, and tried to generate a sense of enthusiasm and importance for the survey amongst them, enhancing the leverage that these interviewers brought to the project themselves.

Sample member–interviewer interaction

When accessing respondents, interviewers were pivotal in persuading 'gatekeepers' such as receptionists, personal assistants and administrators to allow access to potential participants. Where the respondent was too busy an alternative time to telephone was agreed. If a call was initially unsuccessful three follow-up telephone calls were made. Following best practice, interviewers already knew of the importance of speaking in a natural voice rather than reading verbatim (Dillman, 1987) and were given the freedom to personalise and request research cooperation in their own words. Having ascertained they were speaking to the right person, whilst working within the overall research agenda they also personalised the introduction to the research, taking into account the characteristics of the particular respondent (Schaeffer et al., 2010), for example by making reference to something pertinent in the respondent's country (for example a football match, an election, or weather).

Interviewers' language skills and cultural awareness were most significant at the point of introduction where each interviewer personalised initial overtures regarding their request to participate according to the type of respondent and their initial responses. This helped, along with assurances of anonymity, to build trust. Although personalisation was used in the introduction, these interviewers were already aware of the need to read questions exactly as worded to ensure consistency across all interviews (Dillman, 1978). Their knowledge of the research from Maura's briefing ensured that interviewers understood the terms used in the questionnaire and could, where necessary, ensure that the meaning was understood correctly by participants.

The research company's quality-control assurances required interviewers to record the reasons for refusal. This allowed the research company to establish early on in the research any systematic factors causing negative leverage (such as length of the survey) or to identify if there is an absence of saliency (this would generally result in the Introduction being re-scripted). None of these were observed in Maura's research, the patterns of reasons for refusal being similar to what they considered 'normal' (Table 1).

The overall impression gained from these data was that potential respondents lacked interest in academic research. Consistent with Wang and Saunders (2012) and Wenemark et al. (2010), amongst the stated reasons for refusal, 'no time to participate' (10.0%) was the most common factor. Sponsorship by the European Union generated very negative responses from some potential respondents, all based in the UK. Refusals based on concern about company confidentiality were higher in the foreign subsidiaries (6.7%) compared to the UK (1.3%). Other than these differences and the gatekeeper issue, there were no other significant differences by respondent type or location amongst the non-respondents.

Table 1: Reasons for Refusal

Reasons	Percent
No explanation (including simply hanging up the phone)	59.2
Gatekeeper refused to put call through to target respondent, usually claiming that target respondent did not have an interest in completing the survey	19.3
No time to participate	10.0
Wrong contact name (and another suitable person in the company was not recommended)	1.5
Company policy of no survey participation	5.6
Survey too long	0.3
Named contact had insufficient knowledge about the survey topic (and another suitable person in the company was not recommended)	1.2

Concern regarding confidentiality of company information	2.3
Other (including an anti-European Union view)	0.6
Total (n = 512)	100.0

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented our reflections on issues related to generating telephone survey responses using the example of multiple respondents across different countries for a study that focussed on the relationship between HRD and the performance of UK owned subsidiaries. Whilst our example is more complex than many HRD research projects that may adopt a telephone interview it has allowed us to illustrate a wide range of factors under the researcher's control that can be leveraged to heighten saliency and maximise participation. Those tailoring methods we consider most effective are:

1. Notification - this involved informing potential participants in advance that they will be contacted by telephone and will be asked to take part in a survey.
2. Follow-up – contacting participants who had agreed to the survey but were not available at the pre-arranged time.
3. Emphasising the survey topic's relevance, or saliency to the potential respondent and their organisation.
4. Personalisation of the introduction from the perspective of the potential respondent and their organisation
5. Assuring the anonymity of the respondent and/or their organisation.
6. Emphasising sponsorship appropriate to the potential respondent such as that from the relevant professional organisation and institutions, such as the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, SHRM (professional), the EU, and the Kaufman Foundation (institutional);
7. Offering incentives to participate such as charitable donations;

and, within an international context:

8. Use of native language;
9. Cultural awareness both in the introduction and throughout the telephone survey.

As suggested in the literature (Wang and Saunders, 2012) use of trained and experienced interviewers greatly facilitated participation. The competence and experience of interviewers appear to be critical for generating valid and reliable data from telephone surveys.

Telephone surveys can be an effective way to generate valid and reliable data, providing gatekeepers and respondents can be persuaded of the utility of the research. Telephone surveys offer a means of collecting data that overcomes geographical distance, and enables an interviewer to leverage salient aspects and gain a higher response rate. Looking to the future, we have observed more generally that interviewees, including those at senior levels and in several national contexts, have been willing to participate in surveys using Skype and Face-Time. Whilst the utility of such technology is still relatively devoid of research, we would recommend its use to be considered, providing it is feasible and culturally acceptable to potential respondents.

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Saunders, M., Lewis P. and Thornhill, A. (2012) *Research Methods for Business Students*. 6th edition. Harlow: UK: Pearson. Chapter 11 provides a useful introduction to questionnaire design, including the use of telephone questionnaires.

Wang, C. and Saunders, M. (2012) Non-response in cross-cultural surveys: reflections on telephone survey interviews with Chinese managers. In Wang, C., Ketchen, D., Bergh, D. (eds.). *West Meets East: Toward Methodological Exchange*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing. This chapter offers a useful discussion of leverage saliency as well as insights into undertaking telephone surveys in China.