

Gatekeeper Negotiation: Seeking the Magic Ingredient

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Gatekeeper Negotiation: Seeking the Magic Ingredient

One of the biggest obstacles for novice and experienced researchers is the process of negotiating their way into organisations to conduct research. There are many tales of research which has stalled at the gate after promising negotiations with willing partners. This paper draws on preliminary research which seeks to examine gatekeeper negotiations. Early themes of timing, trust, reputation, and personal and professional contacts, are discussed with reference to feedback from participants. It is clearly not just the skill of the researcher in the negotiation process which leads to successful or unsuccessful gatekeeper negotiation outcomes.

One of the biggest obstacles for novice and experienced researchers is the process of negotiating their way into organisations to conduct research. There are many tales of research which has stalled at the gate after promising negotiations with willing partners. This paper draws on preliminary research conducted in 2009 and 2010, including a workshop at ANZAM 2009, which examines gatekeeper negotiations.

Gatekeepers do not always look like the sentry at the gate which the name implies. Gatekeepers can be highly ranked officials, board members, receptionists, secretaries or executive assistants. They can also be anonymous others on the end of the phone or familiar friends who get cold feet about allowing researchers into their field. At times they can be the decision maker in the organisation who the researcher can never speak to and who makes the decisions hiding behind others. For the purposes of this paper gatekeepers range from those who allow first access to an organisation to commence negotiations, to those whose word constitutes the final say on access to people or data.

In the research methods literature, the discussion is more often about “access” rather than gatekeepers, and the reasons for this are many and varied. Discussion of access to private settings often refers to negotiating with gatekeepers or key others who will determine what will be allowed. In public settings discussion of access is usually about potentially vulnerable populations, ethical considerations and how the researcher can gather data unobtrusively.

Access to organisations is a key element of undertaking research in the business and management field. Organisational permission is required before employees, customers or other stakeholders can be asked to participate in research, or before documents which are not in the public arena can be accessed. Typically,

organisations will have a decision making hierarchy which determines who has access to whom and what, and in what format. Novice and experienced researchers can find that a well thought out and carefully planned research project is delayed, stalled, or cancelled due to the actions of those who have responsibility for allowing or denying access. “Gatekeepers”, those who hold the key to data, or are the key holders to locked doors of access, can make a significant difference to a research project.

Feldman, Bell and Berger (2003: ix) argue that “the door image is too simple” and suggest instead a “long hallway with a multitude of doors”. Their argument, and this image, confirms that access is a complex and multi-faceted process, and that doors – or gates – must be opened by people permitting access. In survey research, gatekeeper negotiation may involve seeking access to a mailing list or to having the gatekeeper mail out an endorsing email with a link to a survey site, but gatekeepers may also be asked to carry out some tasks to keep a mailing list or other data confidential from the researcher. In qualitative research the negotiation process may be about access to people for interviews or observation, for filming, taking photos or even for unobtrusive collection/collation of data from sources such as websites, blogs or emails.

The research methods literature offers advice on the processes associated with conducting surveys including methods to increase response rates and obtain ‘quality data’, but the gatekeeper negotiation process itself often receives little or no attention. Lindsay (2005: 120) suggests that the neglect of issues associated with gatekeeper negotiation might be due to the “dominant cultural model of what a journal article about survey results should contain – and what it should not contain”. This does not explain the limited attention paid to gatekeeper negotiation in text books, although this is less the case in more recent books. Qualitative research methods literature tends to pay a little more attention to the gatekeeper, with access being a part of the process. Referring to gatekeepers within the social work arena Clark (2010: 2) observes that “there remains little research that is specifically designed to investigate ... the researcher-gatekeeper relationship”. Casting the net more widely, specific discussions of gatekeepers can be found in relation to fieldwork in human geography (Campbell, Gray, Meletis, Abbott & Silver, 2006), where

exploration of the dynamic nature of the relationships of access to resources through gatekeepers

highlighted some key lessons for researchers:

- The forms of gatekeepers vary with “different gatekeepers offering different access to different types of resources” (p. 114);
- Researchers have different relationships with different gatekeepers and “different levels of closeness can have benefits and drawbacks for researchers” (p. 114)
- Relationships with gatekeepers are not static- and “the researcher’s experience in the field may mean that access through the gatekeeper is no longer essential” (p. 115)
- The perception of the relationship between gatekeeper and research participant is not something a researcher can control and this may “reflect a disjuncture between the theory and practice of field methods” (p. 116) especially where efforts are being made by the researcher to be objective or “neutral”.
- The gatekeeper has a larger role than just providing access and there is a need to “more overtly consider the power relationships ... and to recognize that gatekeepers can attempt to control, reroute or otherwise influence research, regardless of how relationships between gatekeeper and researcher, both professional and persona appear at the outset” (p. 117).

Similarly in sociology, experience associated with access to “elites” has identified the need for the researcher to (Ostrander 1993):

- Use their own contacts to find participants;
- Make the “right” contacts – “in the right order” – avoiding those who might “present difficulty” (p. 10);
- Do background work in preparation for gatekeeper negotiation;
- Appreciate the co-operation of participants, and be open about their own goals for the research – including publishing;
- Take time to address concerns;
- Be aware that there will be a continuous process of evaluation of the research and the researcher;
- Be “aware that gaining access is not the same as gaining trust” (p 9)
- Put agreements in writing – protecting the research, and keep control of how the research is undertaken *and reported*;
- Provide appropriate feedback and keep some gatekeepers informed about progress.

The discussion by Ostrander about the gatekeeper negotiation process with regard to elites can be contrasted with the discussion of ethnographic research in an environment involving a vulnerable population and a sensitive issue – in this case young Muslim women on reproductive health and family planning (Rashid, 2007). Key elements of this type of gatekeeper negotiation included reducing suspicion about the researchers’ work, seeking permission from feared leaders such as landlords, political leaders

and criminal leaders; coaxing overworked health workers to take on additional work in introducing the researcher to potential participants; and negotiating the complex relationships in families where permission needed to be sought from mothers-in-law and husbands.

From an organisational perspective the differences in access and co-operation have been highlighted with regard to “gatekeepers’ practices to grant or withhold access, and the influence of perceived benefits and threats to cooperation” (Wanat 2008: 191). Identifying official approval as being different from informal cooperation, Wanat offers examples of “informal gatekeepers feeling pressured to participate” (p. 199) and the need to assure them that their particular operation was not at threat of harm, as well as intermediate gatekeepers who could facilitate or limit data collection because they hold “formal authority positions but also had informal relationships with the participants”.

In a more difficult setting, Jeffords (2007) discusses the role from the perspective of a gatekeeper in the juvenile justice system in the US. He identifies that agency benefit is probably the most important element for the researcher to highlight in negotiations with agency, but that the minimization of impact on the agency in terms of workload will also facilitate co-operation. This relates not only to the workload generated by their staff having to help out with data collection but also, in the juvenile justice system, the disruption to routine and any potential security risks.

The literature on gaining access, and on negotiating with gatekeepers, highlights techniques to improve response rates for surveys, develop trust for interviews and observation, improve data quality for researchers undertaking ethnographic studies, and keeping the researcher safe in foreign or unfamiliar environments. This research focuses more on the process based on the experiences of researchers who agreed to recount their experiences on successful and unsuccessful gatekeeper negotiation.

The institutional gatekeepers in grant making bodies and ethics committees are considered to be a separate topic and are beyond the scope of this paper, other than where interaction with these gatekeepers plays a role in the process of negotiating with organisational representatives.

Research Methods

This project has an evolving and iterative approach, which to date has had a number of stages of data collection. The idea for the research came from discussions with colleagues at ANZAM in 2008 about obstacles to access which gatekeepers were proving to be for a particularly sensitive project for one of our group. We speculated that gatekeeper negotiation was easier when the researcher was an experienced researcher with a reputation in the field of research, and on topics which were not considered to be particularly sensitive. We concluded in our discussions, however, that this was an oversimplification of a far more complex issue which warranted further investigation.

An initial round of data collection consisted of emails used to construct an overview of the types of experiences encountered by colleagues, both novice and experienced, in their efforts to gather data for research. These emails sought initial feedback on a series of questions which canvassed such matters as the relative experience of the researchers, the sensitivity of topics and the success or otherwise of negotiations.

From this, and a search of the literature, a workshop was constructed and conducted with a small group at ANZAM in December of 2009. Discussions in the workshop were lively and explored a range of themes including dream and nightmare gatekeepers. Activities conducted in the workshop yielded data which included stories of researcher experiences with gatekeeper negotiations, both good and bad. It also generated further questions about how best to approach gatekeepers. Follow up data collected from participants and a wider group of colleagues comes from both emails and face to face discussions to clarify and further explore some of the key themes which emerged in the workshop.

To date this research project has collected data from just over twenty people. Those people range from seasoned researchers whose tales included the triumphs and disasters of student researchers they had mentored and supervised, to student researchers still battling the gatekeeping process. The research projects which were recalled by these researchers include broad scope survey research, one on one interviews and group interviews in public, private and nonprofit organisations. The researchers also contributed their own stories to the discussion in the workshop.

The voices of experience: Key themes which have emerged from the data

This research is still in its infancy, but there are a number of key themes which have emerged from the project to date. Respondents to the email data collection and participants in the workshop described a range of encounters with gatekeepers which highlighted a number of issues both good and bad for the gatekeeper negotiation process. No one method of approach seemed to have the key to the gate, and the timing or setting of approach seems to vary in its success as well. As one of the workshop participants put it, all that is needed is the “right dinner” or the “right conference” and “suddenly the door has opened”.

The door suddenly opening seems to be attributable to the coming together of a range of factors which include an organisation which is interested in the proposed research or has an area they are seeking to have researched, and which has the capacity to accommodate the research project at that particular time, and people who are welcoming of or at least sympathetic to the research process. So with an open or welcoming organisation and open or welcoming people the researcher gains access relatively easily. What is clear, however, is that when either the organisation or the people are not so welcoming the process of negotiation is less likely to have the outcome desired by the researcher, and this seems to be the case whether the researcher classified themselves as novice or experienced.

In the workshop, participants identified that the dream gatekeeper communicates effectively, responds to approaches, has similar goals or wants similar outcomes to the researcher, and often has some experience

with research. The nightmare gatekeeper was identified as being an excuse maker who stonewalls or dismisses the research, can't see any benefit in the opportunity or at worst sabotages the research project.

The stories related by individual respondents highlighted some other more serious outcomes, in some cases devastating, which serve as reminders of the importance of gatekeeper negotiation in the research project. Examination of these would indicate that turnover and politics, as well as a failure to document and confirm negotiations are likely to lead to more ruinous outcomes for researchers and or projects.

Timing

Quite a number of the researchers indicated that the process of negotiation took longer than they had anticipated. In addition the timing of data collection seems to have had an impact as well. One storyteller indicated that the approvals received from their university came through at the end of the year – in time for relevant gatekeepers, and many of the potential respondents in their target organisation, to be on leave. Another indicated that they had planned for the data collection to take place in a certain time period which fitted in with their own schedule, only to find that data collection was significantly delayed by the amount of time it took to get gatekeeper approvals from the respondent organisation. Timing, it seems, is a key “magic ingredient” and one researcher who was aware of this arranged to undertake all their extensive data collection in a two month period so as not to lose approval of any participant organisations due to turnover or politics in any organisation:

I actioned consent to conduct the study in the [identifier removed] very very quickly, within 2 months of my ethics approval all of my data was collected. I think had I taken a more relaxed approach to data collection I would have missed the boat, sometimes the more people think about things the more they get worries/cold feet

The factoring in of time for gatekeeper negotiation into the planning of research is something which is mentioned briefly in the literature but which does not get a great deal of attention. Some researchers found that it took a very long time to achieve access to organisations which agreed in principle quite quickly but which then had quite time consuming internal approval processes. Formal gatekeeping processes proved insurmountable for one researcher who was an employee of the organisation. Local

approval was forthcoming quite quickly but convincing the senior members of the organisation proved to be very time consuming and complex and led to the abandonment of the project.

Personal and professional contacts

A common theme throughout the data to date is the use of personal and professional contacts by researchers to commence gatekeeper negotiations. The views as to how the personal and professional contacts work (or don't) are quite varied. Some respondents found that their contacts were not as easy as they thought they might be:

My informal networks have been very helpful – saying that I was still surprised to discover that some of my informal networks did not work as well as I had hoped (eg deciding not to participate, or still needing lots of chasing up for surveys etc).

and one who indicated that their professional contacts meant

Many of them knew me, as I had been the one of the trainers who had delivered the face-to-face training.

went on to say that

Collecting data from small business owner managers has been really difficult. They were reluctant to participate in the research in any form. It took many phone calls, persistence on my part to get people to take part. They use lack of time as rationale for not taking part. For many it was a case of “what’s in it for me?” if they could not see anything for themselves then they chose not to participate. I had to ‘bribe’ participation in focus groups by offering store vouchers, and lunch just to get people to attend.

Researchers did not always separate personal and professional contacts, and connections to organisations were sometimes the result of previous research contacts.

Personal contacts in organisations proved to be problematic when assumptions were made about the relationship instead of key elements of the agreement being documented at the commencement of the project:

Negotiations were successful and project went well until end when there was disagreement over who “owned” the data collected by the researchers. Researchers were of the view that it was ours but organisation who had facilitated researcher contact with other organisations considered it was theirs and wanted us to “hand it over”. Final report had been published and all monies paid so we didn’t hand over our data but this should have been sorted out at the commencement of the project.

As researchers we did not anticipate that the facilitating or partner organisation might consider that they had a right to “our” data but they obviously expected that the project was done with their name attached so they thought they were “entitled”. Sadly the personal contacts which had led to this research became very strained while sorting this out and have cooled to the point where no further research could be undertaken via that organisation.

This failure to clarify elements of the agreement in writing was also a problem where the personal contact no longer worked for the organisation at the end of the project:

Success was to do with personal contact recognising benefits available from the research and championing our proposal with her superiors and with head office, but end of project was complicated by turnover of original champion, lack of clarity about mutual expectations in terms of what was in writing (at least what the new person had copies of) and we had to provide her with copies of original emails etc to confirm our agreement with her predecessor.

The use of personal or professional contacts should not obviate the need for some level of formal documentation of the key elements of what has been agreed to with organisational representatives.

Ostrander’s advice (above) to put agreements in writing is pertinent to this.

Cold canvassing seems to be less common, with even experienced researchers indicating that this was unusual.

Actually I haven't ever "cold called" an organisation for research purposes in this sense - though I have employed a telemarketing firm to do the cold calling!

One researcher did report having just approached organisations cold using database information and follow up letters:

I sent out a letter of invitation to be interviewed by random selection from freely available databases and websites. I then followed this letter up a few days afterwards to confirm an appointment via their personal assistants

The success or otherwise of cold calling is an area for further exploration.

Reputation

Reputation, not necessarily as a researcher but certainly as a person to be trusted, seems to have had an impact in a number of the situations described by respondents. Many of the novice researchers relied on personal contacts for their initial projects and only after developing their reputation as a researcher did they then move on to contacts which were about their reputation as an expert or researcher.

The use of personal and professional contacts was not superseded by reputation as a researcher, but reputation for research in a particular field did smooth the way for studies to be undertaken on the same topic in different organisations. These later activities also relied to some degree on the professional contacts made via their initial personal or informal networks. A number of researchers reported having been able to go on and conduct related research without having personal contacts in organisations, by virtue of being able to point out their work in the field. Conversely, reputation is just as easily spoiled by a bad relationship with one participant organisation, as with any reputation or credibility.

One respondent relied on previous employment and professional networks to make contacts allowing research in a sensitive field. Her comments on the initial project show how her research may not have been successful without the personal contacts:

I can summarise by saying if I didn't know people and have good networks within the [identifier deleted], my study would never get off the ground.

Her reputation since that initial project has led to development of her research:

I'm pretty well recognised within WA and possibly Australia as a [identifier deleted] researcher. I have had numerous requests from professional associations, government bodies and other universities to present seminars on my research topic. My strong media presence during 2008I have had overseas communication regarding my research from union members and workers from the US and UK.

This has led to a further large project with an industry partner is based on her reputation rather than personal contacts.

The move from trust based on personal contacts to trust based on reputation is one to be further explored. It appears that the development of the portfolio of research over time then helps the gatekeeper negotiation process based on the outcomes of that research.

Dreams and nightmares

Exploration at the ANZAM workshop of the dream gatekeeper and the nightmare gatekeeper highlighted that different researchers have different expectations from gatekeepers. Light hearted comments about

the gatekeeper just allowing access yielded to more serious comments about nightmare gatekeepers who don't allow access to the decision makers and insist on the researcher following particular processes which take up time. Words which were used by participants included "unhelpful", "unapproachable" and "unfriendly" but the word "sabotage" was also recorded. Nightmare gatekeepers were characterised in the discussions as being not only difficult to deal with but also distorting the message from the researcher to the decision makers or sabotaging the research by passing on inaccurate messages to the participants. Conversely dream gatekeepers were characterised as facilitating access and even championing the research with the decision makers and participants. Words such as "supportive", "accessible" and "approachable" were recorded, as was "reliable – do what they say they will/follow through".

Discussions led to agreement in the workshop that there are differing levels of gatekeepers and the power held by an individual who is an initial gatekeeper may actually be only position power by virtue of the capacity they have to allow the researcher access (or not) to the decision makers who are the official gatekeepers.

Evidence from the respondents to the email data collection processes indicates that some of the "nightmare" gatekeepers were those who changed their minds about access or whose exercise of power seemed to have no connection to the research. One respondent indicated that it was the personal assistant to the director who determined when and if the researcher spoke to the director. While on the surface this appeared to be related to how busy the director was, in the long run seemed to be at the whim of the personal assistant and not related to his actual interest or availability.

I found out later that he was available, and interested, but that his PA had decided it was too hard to manage me or something, and so was blocking my access to him.

Another researcher, however, indicated that they had developed their relationship with the personal assistant as gatekeeper:

I am not sure of the reason but I had few refusals to be interviewed. I made a point of getting the names of all the personal assistants as they were really the 'gatekeepers' and the relationship I established with them became the entry point for all communication. I guess I also went out of my way to accommodate them for interview times etc

Power and politics

Anecdotal evidence suggests that even when lower level staff have agreed and can see benefits in proposed research, more senior people in organisations at times reject requests for access apparently based on a lack of interest or understanding. Evidence collected in the current study suggests that going into organisations at the top can have risks:

In one, the gatekeeper was the CEO (large hospital) who subsequently retired amidst vague rumours of poor performance. Certainly, he was very hands-on with the project and had a hard job I suppose of getting warring factions (nurses vs doctors etc) to agree to changes, which is what we were researching. Quite a few staff didn't like the suggestions and I suspect viewed us with suspicion, though we were trading on our "independent" status. I always had the feeling there were powerful currents swirling invisibly around us.

The emergence of power and politics as undercurrents in the gatekeeping process not only manifest themselves in reduced success in the data collection process, but can also result in stalled or incomplete projects.

But long experience with working with organisations that approached me or the uni or my students suggests a key theme - success is very dependent on one or a few key relationships, and often these turn out to be disappointing due to turnover or politics. Often you don't really know why they want to work with you or what they are after - you have a sense there's more to it. Then, individuals move on and the organisation as a whole doesn't want to know anymore. This has happened with several large public and private orgs.

There is a link back here to the personal and professional contacts theme, where a relationship with a key individual or contact in the organisation is part of the picture. The quote above echoes the experience of the respondent mentioned previously who experienced difficulties with the new occupant of the gatekeeper position when the "original champion" left the participant organisation. In that case the new person in the role did not have a clear understanding of the research project, and was not familiar with what had been negotiated. The new person *failed to understand what we were trying to explore and only wanted what she wanted from the data.*

Underlying some of this data is a sense that power and politics play an important role in relation to gatekeeper negotiations. Some of the actions of both dream and nightmare gatekeepers are likely to be tied up with these two elements, and these require further exploration.

Future Directions

This project will need to progress to more in-depth face to face interviews with researchers about their gatekeeper negotiation experience. Early themes of timing, trust, reputation, and personal and professional contacts appear to have links to more complex matters such as politics and the exercise of power. It is evident at this early stage that it is not just the skill of the researcher in the negotiation process which leads to successful or unsuccessful outcomes. Feldman, Bell and Berger (2003) identify that researchers need to convince contacts to take the time to allow them to find out about the proposed research project, and then once interest is piqued, to persuade them that they are a credible and trustworthy researcher and that their research is “beneficial, or at least not harmful”.

The evidence from this current study demonstrates that the gatekeeper negotiation process is not just about gaining access. What is negotiated at the outset can be crucial to the successful continuation and conclusion of the research. The development greater understanding of gatekeeper negotiations will help novice researchers to undertake this important task and offer reminders to the experienced, and will assist with avoiding obstacles which determine whether a project proceeds or not. Supervisors of higher degree research candidates, honours students, and research teams can benefit from being able to pinpoint with their charges the sorts of tactics which work, and the potential pitfalls which researchers might encounter if gatekeeper negotiation is not well handled, or overly ambitious projects are proposed. It is necessary to further explore the importance of the maintenance of the relationship with the gatekeeper, and to seek ways to minimise the possibility that power and politics contribute to the early termination of research projects, or lead to disputes which put further research or findings at risk. This study has yet to reveal a magic ingredient which is in the control of the researcher and which ensures successful access for the completion of research projects.

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