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Getting in through the front door: The first hurdle of researching in
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Getting in through the front door: The first hurdle of researching in companies

ABSTRACT

This paper examines what is arguably the most important issue in qualitative research - access to willing participants - specifically in the context of companies. This is of considerable importance in vocational education and training (VET) as workplaces are the site of much VET activity. While research textbooks discuss many issues in research, few address this topic explicitly or in depth. From those textbooks aimed at undergraduate students (eg Polonksy and Waller 2005) to the more scholarly books such as the Sage handbook of organisational research methods (Buchanan & Bryman, eds., 2009) there is scarcely a mention of the problem of gaining access to organisations. Yet access is the major hurdle for most researchers, particularly when researching in companies. Attempting to gain access is a lengthy and sometimes dispiriting activity with outcomes that are often satisficing rather than optimal. The paper, based on Australian researchers' experiences, reports on the difficulties of gaining access to suitable sites, and the ways in which access were gained, and reflects on the outcomes of the access process. This is undertaken partly through the author's self-reflection on her own experiences in carrying out three VET research projects during 2010, requiring access in total to 13 case study sites and 20 phone interview participants, and partly through email interviews with other VET researchers who have researched within companies during three recent years.

INTRODUCTION

For companies, providing access for research is not a straightforward matter. Companies may consider many factors including the availability of time (Okumus, Altinay & Roper 2007), but the nature of these reasons has not been researched. One may speculate that there are nuisance and sometimes safety or health issues associated with having a researcher on site; there is the possibility of the company being reported in an unfavourable light particularly if it is a company not easily disguised; and there is the fact that assisting research is not core business for the company. If a manager interview only is required, this is one thing, but if access to workers is requested, this may add extra layers of complexity and worry for the company. For example, how are the workers to be pulled off the shop floor or away from their work stations without productivity effects? How can interview rosters be managed in businesses which employ part-time labour? Will workers have to be paid to come in on overtime to be interviewed if they cannot be released during rostered hours? Should the company worry about whether workers may say 'the right thing?' Will workers be nervous or anxious about being interviewed?

In small companies it is the role of the manager to make the ultimate decision to grant access, but in large companies a decision by a senior manager or board of directors is required, meaning that the process may be very lengthy and can easily be rejected by any one of a number of people. Decisions may be swayed by potential benefit to the company accruing from the research, but of course, ethical considerations mean that researchers cannot provide their findings to companies except in ways that thoroughly de-identify any staff members involved and other companies involved in the research.

Sometimes it is impossible to know why access is refused; Tannock (2001), for example, attributes his inability to gain access for research in North American fast food to companies not wishing to disclose their bad practices, but the reasons could have been quite otherwise. The research reported in this paper is in the discipline of vocational education and training (VET). While some research in this discipline takes place in training providers, much takes place in companies. Yet the problems of getting into companies are rarely discussed in this discipline, with an exception being a paper on company case studies (Smith, 2000). The reason for a lack of interest in this issue could be that learning and training could be seen relatively uncontroversial and rarely involve issues of extreme sensitivity, as for example may be the case in organisations such as the police (Fox & Lundman, 1974), yet there are issues which are controversial in this field such as companies' use of government funding for training. Companies could also be sensitive about anything that might be seen as reflecting on whether they are doing the 'right thing' by their workers, which includes access to training.

The research study therefore aimed to throw some light on this topic. As a small-scale initial study, it involved only the researcher point of view and did not research with companies. The research questions for the study were:

- How easy or difficult is it for vocational education and training (VET) researchers to gain access to companies for research?
- What might be some consequences of failing to gain access as desired?
- What researcher strategies facilitate access?

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE

Gummesson (2000, p. 25) states that access is 'the researcher's Number 1 problem'. Yet his understanding of the word access is 'to really be able to find out what is happening' ie the emphasis is on getting near the key players and getting at the nub of the matter. The problem of initially getting into the company, the topic of this paper, is not considered. But many researchers experience this problem. Buchanan, Boddy & McCalman (1988) and Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, and Jackson (2008) provide a greater understanding of the researcher's task. Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) discuss several potential difficulties, including the problems associated with 'cold-calling' (an unpleasant activity at the best of times as Goldstein, 2002, also points out), and the possibility of one's sponsor or gatekeeper leaving the company and leaving behind others who are not interested. Problems arise even at the entry level of research; I'Anson & Smith (2004), for example, found that 14 of 49 hospitality management students experienced access difficulties in undertaking a research project.

Easterby-Smith et al. (2008) provide a ray of hope in that they argue that an increasing proportion of tertiary-educated managers may mean that managers are increasingly likely to be sympathetic to an approach from a university academic or research student. They also stress the importance of addressing some internal need within the company, discussing six possible needs: to tackle a known problem, to gain support for a new idea, to demonstrate success, to help defend a person or unit against attack, to act as a sounding board, and to support research for its own sake (Easterby-Smith et al. 2008).

A 'gatekeeper' to the company is often said to be important (Gummesson 2000); yet it can be dangerous to rely on a low-level gatekeeper delivering access as if they lose interest the project can founder (I'Anson & Smith 2004). Kramer, Wells, Bigelow, Carlan, Cole &

Hepburn (2010) discuss the benefits of working with intermediary organizations who can both operate as research partners and gain access to companies. Gaining access through third parties is also recommended as an alternative to cold-calling, by Easterby-Smith et al. (2008).

While getting into companies is the major concern for researchers, they must, of course, attend to appropriate methodological criteria. In order for the research to be respected, both in the scholarly community and more broadly, the companies selected must show some sort of generalisability or representativeness (Yin 2003). When undertaking multiple case studies, researchers commonly look for a range of companies that illustrate some type of variability such as size, location and industry sector. However, in the end, as Okumus et al. (2007, p.13) point out with honesty, the use of the word 'sampling' is misleading as, in the case of their own research, 'the companies selected themselves ... by agreeing to support each project.' The gratitude engendered by getting access can affect the research in that researchers may be unwilling to lose access during the research by asking 'critical or demanding questions' (Welch, Marschan-Piekkari, Penttinen, & Tahvanainen 2002). O'Leary (2004, p.152) addresses the problem more bluntly by saying that researchers should not 'ingratiate (themselves) to the point of becoming sycophantic'. Thus, difficulties of access can potentially compromise the quality of the research.

RESEARCH METHOD

The topic was researched in two phases. The first phase was a reflection of the author's own experiences in the year 2010, during the management of three research projects where access to companies was required. The second phase involved a survey of other vocational education and training researchers who had recently managed projects involving research in companies.

Phase 1: Author's own experience

The author managed three national Australian research projects during 2010, each of which involved access to companies. The projects were as follows:

Project 1: This research, on apprenticeships and traineeships, was undertaken with the assistance of nationally competitive research grant funding, and involved several surveys and stakeholder interviews as well as case studies in nine companies. The case studies included six to 12 interviews at senior manager to shop floor level, including human resource/training personnel. Case studies took between half a day and a day and a half. There was a team of three researchers.

Project 2: This was a small pilot project about skill in service sector work, funded by an industry skills council, and including stakeholder interviews as well as case studies in four companies. Case studies included three to six interviews from site manager and worker level. Case studies took around half a day. Two researchers were involved.

Project 3: This small project was commissioned by a national research organisation, to inform its advice to the Australian government on the reform of the Australian apprenticeship system. The project involved 20 interviews, including 14 in enterprises and six in Group Training Organisations (GTOs). GTOs are intermediary organisations which employ apprentices and trainees and 'hire them out' to enterprises. The project involved only telephone interviews of 30-60 minutes with an appropriate manager within each company. A

few interviews were undertaken face to face because the companies were local to the two researchers.

Phase 2: Other researchers' experiences

To supplement the above experience, contact was made with other Australian VET researchers who had undertaken research in companies. The way in which this was done was as follows. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) in Australia publishes a volume of 'Key Research Messages' each year, based on research it has funded the previous year. The Key Research Messages for 2008-10 were inspected, and those researchers whose projects seemed to involve research in enterprises were contacted to ascertain their willingness to participate in an email questionnaire. Ethics approval from the University of Ballarat Human Research Ethics Committee was gained. Only the first-named author of the research reports was contacted.

The contact process had two stages: firstly the researchers were contacted to see if they were interested, and then they were sent the email questionnaire. A total of 12 people were contacted, eight indicated their willingness to participate, and from these eight people, five responses were received to the email survey. The participants were asked the following questions:

1. Please outline briefly your experience in researching within and/or with companies (by companies please include non-commercial enterprises but not RTOs¹). Please include access for telephone interviews as well as site visits.
2. Please describe briefly how easy or difficult it has been to gain access to companies.
3. Are you able to give one example of a particularly easy access experience? If so please describe briefly.
4. Are you able to give one example of a particularly difficult access experience? If so please describe briefly.
5. What are the consequences of failing to gain access to suitable companies, in terms of the quality of research?
6. Have you ever returned to the same company more than once, to facilitate access? Does this have any consequences in terms of research quality?
7. What factors might lead to companies to refuse access, in your view?
8. What advice would you give to a researcher seeking to gain access to companies?
9. How can access to companies be improved?

The responses were then collated and analysed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Phase 1: Author's own experience

The way in which access was gained to the companies during the three research projects is summarised in Tables 1 to 3, with a description of the access challenges.

¹ Note: RTOs stands for Registered Training Organisations, the term used in Australia for accredited training providers

For Project 1, the method involved nine case studies in a range of industry areas, with some companies that employed apprentices and trainees and some that employed both. Table 1 shows seven of the case study companies. The other two were Group Training Organisations, which are outside the scope of this paper. Almost all of the seven case studies were either secured by the principal researcher (the author of this paper), or included people known to her from previous projects and then approached by other team members. Many dead ends and blind alleys were negotiated before the final list was achieved. For example an electrical company promised participation and then stopped replying to emails and phone calls. Two hospitality companies expressed initial interest; one withdrew because it was contracting and the other because it was expanding rapidly. A community services organisation recommended by a training provider expressed initial enthusiasm but then the gatekeeper went away on holidays and on his return did not respond to phone messages. Eventually we achieved a reasonable spread of organisations across industry areas and managed to access companies employing the appropriate mix of apprentices and trainees. Only one case study (number 4) had arisen from a cold call, and this company was approached because it had recently won a national training award.

Table 1: Project 1 (case studies)

No.	Pseudonym	Industry	Cold call	Volunteer from earlier phase in same project	Recommendation (state source)	Contact from previous project
1.	Building Co	Large builder, domestic				x
2.	Electrical RailCo	Major electrical contractor		x		
3.	Hospitality and GamingCo	Clubs				x
4.	Manufacturing Co	Steel manufacturing	x			
5.	PowerCo	Electricity distribution			Stakeholder interviewed for same project	
6.	Restaurant Co	Fast food			Participant in previous project	x
7.	RetailCo	Variety store				x

Project 2 was undertaken as a pilot study for a major research grant application and was funded by an industry body. There were a number of industry-level interviews, but only three participating companies were required for case studies, one each in hospitality, retail and hairdressing. As the research was in the industry areas that the industry body dealt with daily, no particular difficulty was anticipated. However, while attempts were made to facilitate access for the researchers, access proved problematic, particularly for the retail case study. The author gained access to one case study herself (site 3) but on the day after access to this site was secured, the industry body secured site 4, which it preferred to site 3. The author was then obliged to undertake an additional case study, since it would have been impolite to renege on the agreement to visit site 3. The extra case study involved additional researcher time and expense, but the richness of the data was improved as a result. Table 2 shows the source of the participating companies.

Table 2: Project 2 (case studies)

No.	Pseudonym	Industry	Found by funding body	Other
1.	Catering Co	Hospitality	x	
2.	Hair Co	Hairdressing	x	
3.	Fine Food Co	Retail coffee and food		x (via researcher's daughter)
4.	Sports Equip Co	Retail sports	x	

Project 3, which involved only telephone interviews with a management representative from each participating company, was undertaken in a very short timeframe and it was expected by the funding body that contacts from previous projects might be used. Despite using this approach, it was still extremely difficult for the researchers to find suitable interviewees. The two researchers agreed between themselves to find ten participants each. Six of these were Group Training Organisations and are not included in Table 3 or the discussion. Several of the participants had been participants in Project 2, as will be seen from the pseudonyms. As with Project 1, the researchers tried to find companies from different industry areas and a mix of those that employed apprentices and trainees.

Table 3: Project 3 (interviews)

No.	Pseudonym	Industry	Cold call (and reason for trying the site)	Other recommendation	Contact from a previous project
Company					
1.	Electrical RailCo	Major electrical contractor			x
2.	Abattoir 1	Meat processing			x
3.	Car Co	Automotive	Yes - Near researcher's home		
4.	Engineer 1	Engineering	Yes - An apprentice won local award		
5.	Sparky's	Electrical contracting	Yes - Won training awards		
6.	Building Co	Large builder, domestic			x
7.	Abattoir 2	Meat processing	Yes - Personal acquaintance		
8.	PowerCo	Electricity distribution			x
9.	BankCo	Banking			x
10.	Retail Co	Variety store			x
11.	Restaurant Co	Fast food			x
12.	Engineer 2	Engineering		Local training provider	
13.	Truck Co	Automotive		Interviewee in	

		heavy vehicle		same project	
14.	Bread Basket	Retail/ Baking		Local training provider	

As with Projects 1 and 2, Table 3 depicts successful achievement of an appropriate mix of companies but hides a great deal of researcher heartache. My fellow researcher described one dead end he experienced as follows:

I had a plumbing company ... that [a GTO] recommended I call. The owner was reluctant when I called and I mentioned my [a GTO] contact and he agreed, albeit with little real enthusiasm and scheduled it for 7.15am as that was the time he was usually in the office before heading out to worksites. Anyway, I called every 10 mins from 7.15 to 9.30, no response, left messages/emails- no reply. Given the initial reluctance, didn't surprise.

In another instance of a dead end, the author attempted an interview with a retail company whom a helpful local contact had telephoned and secured agreement to participate. Emails remained unanswered and several phone calls were attempted before telephone contact was finally made. The participant fixed a time that suited him, but asked by email the day before to 'reschedule'. My fellow researcher then took over this contact, only to find that when he rang at the agreed interview date and time, the participant had left for the day. The contact was then abandoned.

Even when agreeing to participate, not all interviewees were particularly co-operative, although some were exceptionally so. My fellow researcher discussed Engineer 1 as follows:

I did that 9.5 min interview with XXX from [Engineer 1]. I rang him because an apprentice and trainee had just featured in the [local GTO] awards in paper earlier in week and I knew he was ex-Chair of [local GTO] and still a board member. He was a little brusque on initial call but did agree to a time anyway. Even though he was local he insisted on a phone interview, and didn't want me to visit. When I rang he already had his answers to the questions ready, said he'd written them down at lunchtime that day. Despite my pressing for my info and expanded answers, all to no avail!

In the case of Engineer 2, the author thought that the interview would be a failure as at the appointed time, the interviewee was not in the office. Two further phone calls were necessary to find the interviewee at her desk. The first interview attempt failed because the interviewee broke off twice to take lengthy phone enquiries from customers. The author was on the point of giving up, but a rescheduled time later that day elicited a good interview with no interruptions.

Phase 2: Other researchers' experiences

The five respondents to the email questionnaire had between them a long history of research in companies. This is indicated below

Interviewee	Experience (extracts)
A	I have conducted four recent research projects which have involved dealing with companies. In the two most recent projects I have been involved in I have undertaken about 25 case studies. These were mostly with private companies, some of which were in person and some were telephone interviews.

B	Have undertaken qualitative field work with a wide range of commercial organisations and not for profit organisations. The most common type of these is the 'workplace case study'. This has included interviews with all levels of senior and middle management and workers.
C	<i>Response not included as it was difficult to understand</i>
D	Two best examples are: [title deleted to preserve confidentiality] project that involved talking to 50 larger companies. Recent project on e-learning that involved talking to 18 companies that have paid RTOs to deliver e-learning for them
E	I have carried out about 40 case studies in a range of organisations, most of which were private companies. I have managed or been involved with research projects that have involved over 100 organisational case studies. I have undertaken a large number of telephone interviews over and above the case study research - probably around 100 or so.

Responses to the question about difficulty of access ranged from 'not difficult' to 'quite to very, very difficult' with respondents spread evenly along the continuum. Respondent E said, of a period of 20 years undertaking case studies.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain access to companies for research. In the past about 50 per cent of companies that I approached would usually agree to participate in a case study. That figure is now down to about one third or lower. As productivity has increased, people in companies have less time to be involved with research. One has to remember that participating in interview and case study research is very time consuming for companies and they have to be convinced that they will get something from the process.

One response indicated that it was more difficult the more senior were the people that were to be interviewed. This response was

In (this) project the follow up was hard, as we had to speak to the CEO or someone at a similar level and they were hard to get. Sometimes the secretary did not want to put you through and other times the CEO was extremely busy. In some cases it took ten or so phone calls just to get their consent or rejection to participate in the research. (Respondent A)

However, examples were also given of easy access:

Yes, the organisation was led (ie CEO level and senior management) by a team who was highly motivated and genuinely interested in the issues - this made a huge difference to getting employer or workplace 'buy-in'. (Respondent B)

Respondent E reported an easy access experience, attributing this to the national Human Resource manager being 'personally very interested in the research topic and because high staff turnover was one of the most important problems that he had to deal with in his job.' Respondent D reported easy access in a project where funding for training delivered by RTOs to the company was being researched; the ease of access was attributed to the fact that companies might see the project findings as evidence for continued or increased funding for the scheme.

When asked to describe difficult access experiences, respondent B said that ‘an outright ‘no’ is fine’ but that difficulties arose when the company agrees initially but then did not follow through. Respondent E described a company which allowed access but then the company contract insisted that the case study be withdrawn from the final publication when the results were not flattering to the company. This respondent had not been allowed to tape interviews and was ‘kept under strict surveillance’ when in the company. Respondent C, on the other hand, said that there had been no difficult access experiences.

Reasons why companies might refuse access, with the numbers of respondents who mentioned them, were given as follows:

- Time (5)
- Commercial sensitivity or privacy (3)
- Difficult people who might block access –senior managers or ‘secretaries’ (2)
- Conflict of interest (1)
- A bad experience relating to the topic being researched (1)
- Not interested in the topic (1)

The respondents thought that lack of suitable access could affect the findings. Respondent B said ‘good access is everything. Without it, it limits and constrains the depth of insight that can be brought’, and respondent D said that if suitable access could not be managed ‘it (would be) about bias effects in the sampling where we only talk to happy companies about their VET experiences’. However it was pointed out by others that it was difficult to judge the quality of data that might have been obtained from companies where access was not gained.

Three of the five respondents had returned to the same company more than once for different projects. One potential drawback of this was that ‘the person can get tired of always being contacted’ (Respondent A). Respondent E said that ‘I do not think you can use the same company more than twice’, although no reason was provided for this. However, respondent A suggested that ‘there are particular companies who tend to participate in research anyway, and as a result this can skew the findings’.

DISCUSSION

Research method literature places a great deal of emphasis on sample selection. The experiences detailed above strongly support Okumus et al. ’s (2007) argument that samples create themselves by agreeing to access. It is very difficult, when begging for access, to ask questions which ascertain whether the company actually meets the research criteria. Very fine judgements and some background work were required in all three projects in Phase 1 in deciding whether to approach particular companies to seek their participation. Phase 2 respondents nearly all reported similar difficulties. It seems that the researcher has to be prepared to collect less than high quality data if these judgments prove to be faulty. Phase 1 also provided a small example of the difficulty associated with multiple approaches to companies, in the expectation that some will not agree to participate. If an over-abundance of sites is secured, the researcher faces a further dilemma.

A return to previous participants can be helpful. Previous research projects yielded half of the participants in Projects 1 and 3 in Phase 1, and three of the five respondents in Phase 2 said they had returned to previously-used companies. Responses to Phase 2 indicated that fine

judgments needed to be exercised to determine which previous participants would respond well to an approach and which would react poorly; and also, of course, whether the participants would yield good research data. It perhaps goes without saying that the previous participants would not have participated in a new project unless they had enjoyed their engagement in previous projects and found it beneficial; the possibility of ‘repeat business’ is something that all researchers need to be aware of. However, there could be concerns about data quality if the same companies are being mined one two or even three occasions for data by the same researcher or research team.

Seeking a third party’s assistance is often recommended in promoting access (Kramer et al. (2010). In Phase 2, one respondent suggested that it was helpful for the companies to have had initial contact from an industry body, Phase 1 (Project 2) experience shows that third-party contact may not always secure access.

What recommendations can we draw from this small project for VET researchers trying to access companies? The next section draws on the conclusions drawn by the author from Phase 1, and also from answers to specific questions in Phase 2 about advice to other researchers, and the facilitation of access.

Going back to companies that have enthusiastically participated in previous research is helpful in gaining access. A relationship of trust can be built up between the researcher and the company, which would be facilitated by taking actions such as sending thank-you letters, and letting them know when the report or other publications are available.

Companies need to have the potential benefits of the research explained to them; such benefits might be for the companies themselves, or might be for the industry as a whole. However, Respondent B in Phase said ‘This is a difficult thing to communicate to businesses, unless they are already aware of (the benefits of research)’. Respondent C in Phase 2 said

If you can value-add in any way, it helps. Of course this means having to do extra work, but as researchers we have a duty to help make sense of our research to companies that may not have the expertise to do this. It is no point sending a document with findings, written in a researcher’s language.

One company in Phase 1 project 1 used the case study written about the company as part of its submission for a State training award; this is a very direct example of benefit.

While recommendations are always helpful, a conclusion might be that third-party approaches do not necessarily work well. Similarly, as Respondent E said,

‘Always (go) to the top. Many researchers think they can reply on personal contacts to gain access, but often these people are too junior to actually gain access.

The actual approach needs to be made by the researcher; only that person can explain clearly what is going to happen in the case study or interview, and can also begin to establish rapport. Two of the respondents in Phase 2 stated that contacting companies and the research interviews themselves should not be ‘outsourced to a RA or project manager or student ... this promotes the importance and the credibility’. Approaches need to be persistent but polite and ‘not pushy’, as one respondent put it. Companies need to be provided with enough, but not too much, information.

CONCLUSION

This research offers some insights into what it is like negotiating access to companies for VET research. An obvious limitation is that the number of people involved in the research is small, and a larger project would be helpful in identifying the prevalence of the problems and of the range of strategies that work. There is also an obvious need for research with companies about the issue, but the prospect of negotiating access for such a project is not an enticing one.

Okumus et al. (2007, p.7) state that 'Inevitably it is the project, the researcher's personality and skills, and the internal dynamics of the participant organization, which all influence gaining and maintaining research access.' The author's experiences with the three research projects described in Phase 1, and the responses to Phase 2 questions, support these three factors. The researcher's personality and skills are particularly important in securing access, not only at the time, but as discussed above, on future occasions, both for that research and for others (Goldstein, 2002). Confidence in the researcher is likely to be improved by the company's perception of the researcher's expertise in the area (Cassell 2009; Ostrander 1993).

The research experiences reported in this paper suggest that it is not just the researcher's actions and approach, and internal dynamics of the company, but also the personality of the contact that are relevant. Whether through cold feet, over-work, bad manners or simply lack of organisation, both phases showed that some participants did not follow through on promises or in some cases simply were not there when contacted for interview. Clearly it is easier to fail to participate in a telephone interview than a face to face interview, particularly in the latter situation if the researcher has travelled a long way to be there.

Why is it important that the problem of research access to companies, such as those described above, are so little discussed, particularly in the VET discipline area? I suggest there are four reasons for researchers to pay attention to the problem.

Firstly, the sheer difficulties overcome by those who research in companies are not appreciated by others who research in different ways or settings. Yet in the VET discipline it is essential to know what goes on in companies as it is in these settings that workers deploy their skills, and often receive their training. Many assumptions are made in the literature about companies' behaviour, but these assumptions are rarely underpinned by empirical research.

Secondly, if we do not pay more attention to the problem of access, those setting out on their research careers could too easily become dejected by their lack of success in accessing sites, not realising that setbacks are normal, and may even give up researching as an activity.

Thirdly, these novice researchers might be underprepared by their research supervisors or mentors and not consider that there are specific skills that need to be learned in order to approach companies successfully, which are just as important as, for example, data analysis skills.

Fourthly, a lack of appreciation of the reasons for companies' reluctance to be involved in research can create a less than respectful attitude on the part of the researcher and continued failure in gaining access.

Fifthly, if the difficulty of access was reduced, it is likely that more attention could be given to some of the problematic features of researching in companies, such as the need to maintain a critical stance while remaining respectful, and the need to pay attention to power relations between different participant groups within a company. As Welch (et al) 2002 say, it is difficult to ask 'critical or demanding' questions when one feels that one's presence in a research site is only just tolerated. Van Maanen (2002) notes the many layers of difficulty associated with organizational research, and it is those 'critical and demanding' questions that improve the quality of nuance in the data which Van Maanen regards as essential.

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