Sexual Harassment Prevention Initiatives: Quantitative & Qualitative Approaches

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Abstract

From a strategic and leadership perspective, organizations may require assistance to study the effectiveness of a sexual harassment prevention initiative. The assistance requested may include *how* to fix a real or perceived problem of sexual harassment but also clarification as to *why* sexual harassment may have occurred. Evaluation of the usefulness of two methods (surveys and focus groups) is explored in this report.

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Sexual Harassment Prevention Initiatives: Quantitative & Qualitative Approaches

The utilization of research methods allows for the systematic collection of data for analysis and interpretation to gain or increase understanding of a phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). An I/O psychologist can build upon data gained during research to assist organizations in improving the human relations climate when faced with instituting an initiative such as sexual harassment prevention. There are many research approaches to be used, and selection will depend upon a multitude of factors, such as the specific needs of the organization, type of data available, and the intended focus of study. Further, attention should be given to the health and possible dysfunction of all organizational levels: individual, group, organization, and systemic (Lowman, 1998).

Research methods in psychology, as with other social sciences (e.g., sociology and anthropology), are designed and developed for categorization, calibration, and organized control (Burman, 1997). However, regardless of the research method selected, the I/O psychologist will use examination and study through observation to develop answers to the research questions raised (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005). The matter then turns to determination of the most appropriate research method for a particular phenomenon to be studied: qualitative or quantitative. Eisner (2003) shares that while both quantitative and qualitative research will describe qualities, the difference is the form of elucidation; quantification will depict information "with respect to magnitude" while qualification will depict information through "descriptive language and the meanings associated with such language" (p. 20).

Quantitative vs. Qualitative

Wilkinson (1999) shares that advocates of either quantitative or qualitative research methods will criticize the other, but each research method carries its own limitations, assets, and

standards of practice. Each method has unique qualities. Whether the method is grounded in ontology and the nature of reality (quantitative), or epistemology and knowledge (qualitative), the overarching objective of increasing the body of psychological work is met. Gelo, Braakman, and Benetka (2008) describe qualitative and quantitative paradigms as such:

> Quantitative paradigms see reality as single and tangible, where the knower and the known are considered as relatively separate and independent. Qualitative paradigms, however, view reality as a multiple, socially and psychologically constructed phenomenon, where the knower and the known are inextricably connected to each other. (p. 269-270)

The qualitative method is hypothesis generating, and will "explore data to form or sharpen hypotheses about a population for assessing future hypotheses"; while the quantitative method is hypothesis testing and will "assess specific a priori hypotheses or estimate parameters by random sampling from that population" (Wilkinson, 1999, p. 594). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2005) quantitative research (also known as traditional or experimental research or the positivist approach) will typically be utilized to explore and answer questions about relationships with measured variables that allow for explaining, predicting, and controlling the phenomena of study. While in qualitative research (also called interpretative, constructivist, or postpositivist), questions are explored and answered by seeking information about the complex phenomena itself through systematic and detailed descriptions of the participants' own experiences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Kostere and Percy (2006) describe the qualitative methodology as "built on naturalistic or humanistic assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge, and values" (p. 33). Thus, the strengths or limitations of the qualitative or quantitative method will depend upon the needs or desires of the researcher and the organization.

Very briefly, approaches for quantitative methods used in psychological research include: descriptive, experimental, and quasi-experimental (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). According to Fife-Schaw (2006) there are three quasi-experimental designs: the nonequivalent control group design, the time series design, and the time series with nonequivalent control group design. The experimental research approach will randomly assign participants for researcher-imposed treatment or intervention, followed with observation or measurement to assess the effect, and is very useful for exploring cause-and-effect relationships (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). There is also descriptive research, which is a very broad category of the quantitative approach. Descriptive research can involve either identifying characteristics of an observed phenomenon or the exploration of possible correlations, and the designs include observation studies, correlational research, developmental, and surveys (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

For qualitative methods there are a variety of approaches such as phenomenology, grounded theory, case study, and ethnography. Phenomenology places focus on "the way things appear to us in experience: how, as individuals, we perceive and talk about objects and events" (Smith & Eatough, 2006, p. 324). The grounded theory approach uses interviews and observations to collect data which is then used to build theories (Kostere & Percy, 2006). The case study method has its roots in sociology and involves using multiple methods and data sources to study a single case or multiple cases (Kostere & Percy, 2006). Ethnography allows for an investigation and narrative account of a culture, cultural group, organization, or groups, along with their features, and its main characteristic is its similarity to anthropological studies in which the researcher spends a great deal of time being immersed in the culture they are studying (Kostere & Percy, 2006).

In determining which approach to use, a fundamental question to answer is: what is the purpose of the study? If the purpose is to explain, predict, confirm, validate, or test a theory, then the quantitative approach is best. If, however, the purpose is to describe, explain, explore, interpret, or build a theory, then the preferred approach would be qualitative (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Along with the purpose of the study comes the process to be used. A quantitative approach is preferred if the study is focused, has known variables, established guidelines, predetermined methods (i.e., measurement), and a detached view (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). In contrast, a qualitative approach is best when the view is holistic, has no known variables, flexibility in guidelines, emergent methods, and a personal view can be taken (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Burman (1997) wrote that a strength of using the qualitative method is the ability to conduct research with—rather than on—people, demonstrating a humanistic approach. Further, how the findings will be reported is considered. In quantitative research, a researcher will look to statistics by sharing data such as the median, mean, and correlations in the form of a formal report, which is quite different from a qualitative approach, which uses an informal and interpretive narrative to convey the information gathered and explored.

Specific Quantitative Approach: The Survey

The quantitative approach appears to be the dominant form of mainstream psychological research today, and Gelo et al. (2008) posit that such has been the case since the 19th century and the "conception of psychology as a 'science'" (p. 268). Marchel and Owens (2007) share that viewpoint and remark that the characteristics of today's psychological research demonstrate realities that can be replicated through studies that have controlled and isolated variables. A specific quantitative approach available to the researcher is the use of surveys. Surveys, in the form of questionnaires, offer the ability to gather information on a boundless number of subjects

in a controlled and methodical manner. A survey can be used to construct data about a person or a group of people and can range from questions about specific characteristics, personalities, and perceptions to opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences. Surveys are typically developed using a Likert scale so respondents can select from among responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Thus, the information obtained from a survey will typically be ordinal.

Surveys offer the advantage of precision in reporting data (through numbers and statistical analysis) and can be more appropriate for situations where the respondent prefers to reveal data through a survey as opposed to an interview or face-to-face discussion. Burman (1997) shares this as an advantage when circumstances dictate that numbers would be more persuasive in the research study, or because this approach is mindful of any perceptions of intrusiveness or sensitivity.

There are perceived disadvantages, however, to using surveys. According to Thurstone (1928) , a survey respondent may not intentionally misrepresent their held attitude when making their response, but nonetheless alter their selection out of respect or courtesy, especially if they believe their truthful answer may not be received well. This can also be conveyed as the weakness of self-reported data, which includes a respondent communicating what they believe to be true or what they think the researcher may want to know (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Specific Qualitative Approach: The Focus Group

Originally developed for market research, the focus group is a type of group interview that allows for sharing of opinions related to a variety of topics or products (Madill & Gough, 2008). Focus groups provide an informal means of gathering data while also generalizing the perceptions taken from a limited sample (Manning, Hock, & Milstead, 1990). This approach provides an excellent means of gathering process insights as opposed to outcomes (Barbour,

2007). According to Manning et al. (1990), there are two main strengths in focus groups: the low cost, and the depth of opinions expressed (e.g., honest expression, instant follow-up, revelation of commonly held viewpoints, and ability for perception assessment).

From a process standpoint, focus groups typically last one to two hours, rules are shared with participants at the beginning, and a moderator facilitates so that all are allowed to share their outlooks and viewpoints (Seal, Bogart, & Ehrhardt, 1998). A focus group process centers on the questions, and considerations for question development include the ordering of the questions and breadth versus depth of information being sought (Napolitano, McCauley, Beltran, & Philips, 2002). In analyzing the data obtained, a researcher will look for evolving issues and themes. Madill and Gough (2008) share that this thematic analysis will center on coding of the qualitative data "producing clusters of text with similar meaning, often searching for concepts appearing to capture the essence of the phenomenon under investigation and producing mid-range theories" (p. 258).

There are perceived disadvantages to the focus group approach. According to Barbour (2007), the comments generated during a focus group will be highly dependent upon context and the exact conversations held, and are therefore dependent on specific responses from other contributors and the dynamics of that group. Further, Gelo et al. (2008) found that in presenting qualitative results, the researcher will need to "build a discussion that persuades the reader that the identified categories and dimensions are effectively grounded in the observed data, and not imposed by the researcher" (p. 277).

It is apparent that approaches for both quantitative and qualitative studies are abundant, varied, and can help meet the needs of organizations for an assortment of issues or concerns. In developing a study for the prevention of sexual harassment in an organization to enhance the

knowledge of leadership, it would be prudent to not only determine the level of information sought but also the desired end result from the organization customer.

Study for Sexual Harassment Prevention Initiative

The I/O psychologist may be called upon by an organization to conduct a study on the effectiveness of a sexual harassment prevention initiative. This is a significant step for an organization as sexual harassment often goes unreported, possibly because employees aren't really sure what constitutes sexual harassment (Valente & Bullough, 2004). Assisting an organization with a sexual harassment prevention initiative is a sensitive topic that requires a great deal of careful deliberation.

From a strategic and leadership perspective, organizations will most likely desire an answer as to *how* to fix a real or perceived problem of sexual harassment, but will also need a factual or rational explanation to clarify *why* sexual harassment may have occurred at all. Thus, the I/O psychologist will start with a review of basic information to better understand the organization. Fuqua and Newman (2002) share that organizations retain characteristics which provide definition, are established, and are long-term. Areas for early exploration include possible disparity of positions between genders, the appearance of the organization demographically and from a diversity perspective, and the composition of the leaders and decision makers in key positions. This preliminary information can be obtained from reviewing official personnel and manning documentation, or from simply reviewing publicity and marketing photos of organizational events and activities to view the intended vision the organization desires to portray. The information gathered from this initial review is important because it provides a foundation to build upon and study further in order to gain a better understanding of the organization.

Dobrich, Dranoff, and Maatman (2002) posit that when sexual harassment occurs, it is in a hostile work environment and indicative of persistent and serious issues with employee respect towards the organization. As Lowman (1998) points out, "even robustly healthy organizations are fragile, vulnerable systems, highly dependent on their environment and, with a few wrong if unintentional moves, fast on their way to their inevitable extinction" (p. 20). Terpstra and Baker (1986) describe the effect:

> In addition to the obvious costs related to the payment of damage awards springing from sexual harassment litigation, there are the hidden costs associated with decreased efficiency, poor morale, turnover and replacement activities, and a damaged public image resulting from problems of sexual harassment. (p. 17)

Therefore, for the strength of the organization as a whole, allegations of sexual harassment should be taken very seriously and not dismissed as irrelevant.

In planning the sexual harassment prevention initiative research, it should be understood that lawful proceedings or other means of complaints may be of concern to the organization, even if that has not been articulated openly. According to Arvey and Cavanaugh (1995), the data obtained may demonstrate that sexual harassment had occurred and the organization may be culpable and therefore need to provide remedy to employees, so it is "worthwhile for behavioral scientists to look carefully at the potential methodological and sampling flaws that might compromise the internal and external validity of any inferences made" (p. 40). Organizational leadership will undoubtedly need to consider the short- and long-term possible effects of addressing or ignoring possible sexual harassment concerns. Although the cost of addressing sexual harassment may seem significant initially, the enduring costs are considerably greater, as deliberations turn towards the expenditure of reduced performance and turnover along with

questionable and unacceptable ethical and moral actions and unhealthy organizational attitudes (Tempstra & Baker, 1986).

Enhancing the Effectiveness

Interestingly, Dobrich et al. (2002) share that it is the employees—the coworkers—who are ultimately the most effective resource in preventing sexual harassment, and they are also the least utilized resource. In implementing any type of sexual harassment prevention initiative, it is important to keep all of the employees in mind for tailoring a product that will be more likely to be embraced and accepted within the organizational culture.

In deciding upon a way ahead, Arvey and Cavanaugh (1995) have provided very useful guidance in assessing the pervasiveness of sexual harassment in organizations. The six suggestions provided were designed around the use of surveys in sexual harassment research, but the author found applicability toward research effectiveness, regardless of the method utilized. Four suggestions have been selected:

- Develop an exact and clear-cut definition of sexual harassment, as this will serve as the guide for development of the research instruments and reduce misinterpretation.
- In describing sexual harassment, a determination of a reasonable time period should be communicated to participants (e.g., within the past year).
- Abstain from defining specific behaviors as sexual harassment. Instead, gather information about the participants' perceptions regarding events, act, and behaviors.
- Assess honestly if there are any potential biases, as these predispositions may sway the outcome and analysis of the results (Arvey & Cavanaugh, 1995).

Finally, to reemphasize, there are other organizational factors that an I/O psychologist should be mindful of when assisting an organization in developing an effective sexual

harassment prevention initiative, for instance, Terpstra and Baker (1986) cite "type of technology, task design (and worker proximity), organization climate, and employee composition" as factors (p. 21). Learning about the organization up front is a first step toward providing the right level and type of assistance to an organization and better meeting their needs. Clearly understanding the customer's requirements while also plainly articulating the services that will be provided will help establish a professional and productive relationship.

Sexual Harassment Prevention Initiative: Survey

There are sexual harassment surveys available to the I/O psychologist. However, it has been noted by several authors (see Lee & Heppner, 1991, p. 512; Murdoch & McGovern, 1998, p. 204; and Arvey & Cavanaugh, 1995, p. 41) that much work remains in not only clearly defining a universal standard of what constitutes sexual harassment but also acceptance on measuring or quantifying the phenomenon. As a result, the goal of many researchers in studying and measuring sexual harassment is to develop an instrument that is widely accepted for use. For instance, Lee and Heppner (1991) worked to "develop an instrument that would measure attitudes toward sexual harassment, specifically sensitivity to the negative effects of sexually harassing behaviors in the workplace" (p. 512). Another example is Murdoch and McGovern (1998), who have developed a "standardized instrument, the Sexual Harassment Inventory (SHI), of good psychometric integrity, written in behavioral terms, that would also weight each behavior according to its relative severity" (p. 204-205). An example of questions used by Murdoch and McGovern include:

1. People with whom I worked made sexual jokes that made me feel uncomfortable.
2. I was touched by a coworker or supervisor in ways that made me feel uncomfortable.

3. A coworker frequently asked me out for dates, even though I had asked him/her to stop.
4. A supervisor or superior officer asked me out for dates, even though I had asked him/her to stop.
5. A supervisor or superior officer threatened to block my promotion unless I agreed to have sex with him/her. (p. 204)

There are a variety of choices for measuring sexual harassment with a survey, but the author's first choice is the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ), developed by Fitzgerald, Gelfand, and Drasgow (1995). The SEQ is "generally acknowledged as the most theoretically and psychometrically sophisticated instrument available" for measuring sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1995, p. 428).

The SEQ, developed in the mid-1980s and revised in the mid-1990s, is a "conceptually grounded, psychometrically sound instrument for assessing the incidence and prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace" (Fitzgerald et al., 1995, p. 425). The SEQ is a relatively short psychometric tool that uses a 3-point Likert scale and is based on a specified theoretical framework that meets both the legal and psychological guidelines for the area of sexual harassment established upon a three-dimensional model, which measures gender harassment (5 items), unwanted sexual attention (7 items), and sexual coercion (5 items) (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). In the gender harassment section, examples of questions include being subjected to suggestive stories, crude sexual remarks, and sexist comments. The unwanted sexual attention section has questions relating to attempts made to discuss sex, attempts made to establish a sexual relationship, and being subjected to staring or leering. Finally, the sexual coercion section

asks about issues such as being subtly bribed or threatened for sex, and being made to feel bad for not cooperating (Fitzgerald et al., 1995, p. 435).

One of the major strengths of the SEQ is its status for reliability. According to Davis and Bremner (2006), reliability is achieved when an experimental effect is consistent or stable over time and can be replicated. Fitzgerald et al. (1995) state that "judged by the traditional standards of applied measurement, the SEQ appears to be a reliable and valid measure of sexual harassment" (p. 440). Further, in harmony with the suggestions made by Arvey and Cavanaugh (1995) on developing effective psychometric tools to measure sexual harassment in organizations, the SEQ has established its psychometric integrity and credibility by conducting many pilot studies to assess reliability and validity of the SEQ instrument.

Survey Data Collection and Analysis

The SEQ allows for both individual and organizational assessment of the data (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). The psychometric tool is quite flexible and uncomplicated for organization assessment, as calculations are based on frequency distributions that are generated at the preferred level of study; for instance, creation of individual frequency distribution for each of the three types (gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion) or a combination of some or all of the three types. Frequency distributions, a rather simple and clear cut means of quantifying data, involve specifying how many times a score may occur and use a histogram to "graph plotting values of observations on the horizontal axis, with a bar showing how many times each value occurred in the data set" (Field, 2005, p. 8). The author would also consider the use of an analysis of variance to test whether there are group means differences between the male and female employees as this information could be quite valuable in helping to

assess whether perceptions relating to sexual harassment in the organization vary between employees based on gender.

For quantitative methods, which include survey data collection and analysis, Gelo et al. (2008) stated that "according to whether the design was experimental or nonexperimental, conclusions may be drawn concerning cause-effect relationships or correlations between variables in the population the sample was selected from" and the results may allow for confirmation, extension, or a dispute of the hypothesis or position (p. 277). Regarding the measurement of attitudes (sexual harassment attitudes or any other), Thurstone (1928) identifies a caveat:

> All that we can do with an attitude scale is to measure the attitude actually expressed with the full realization that the subject may be consciously hiding his true attitude or that the social pressure of the situation has made him really believe what he expresses. (p. 534)

Thurstone also mentioned that measuring an attitude does not automatically bring a prediction of what will happen; for as researchers, we do not forecast behaviors.

Survey Usefulness

Arvey and Cavanaugh (1995) communicate that the SEQ characterizes a principally rigorous and sturdy psychometric tool for measuring sexual harassment in an organization. At the fundamental level, this measurement approach is exactly what an organization that is interested in implementing a sexual harassment prevention initiative would want to utilize to determine whether the program was actually needed. The SEQ can be quite useful to the organization in assessing the need for a sexual harassment prevention initiative, and Fitzgerald et al. (1995) share that the SEQ provides the ability to assess the perceived climate of the organization's tolerance by the higher levels recorded.

Related to this, higher SEQ scores point towards less satisfaction between coworkers and supervisors but not necessarily the work itself. This type of data can be quite valuable to an organization in revealing employee morale issues or lack of commitment because of sexual harassment concerns, which ultimately harms an organization and can exact a high monetary and effective price (Fitzgerald et al., 1995).

Sexual Harassment Prevention Initiative: Focus Group

Another consideration for studying a sexual harassment prevention initiative is through the qualitative method of the focus group. Gelo et al. (2008) stated that with qualitative research, the collection of data is developed around reaching a detailed understanding of the perspective of the participants. It is for that reason the qualitative approach has a "lower degree of standardization" when it is judged against the data collection for a quantitative approach (Gelo et al., 2008, p. 275).

The focus group allows for many employees to participate in a relatively short amount of time. Questions used for sexual harassment prevention can range from the personal experiences of witnessing or being subjected to inappropriate behaviors (where we've been) to recommendations for organization leadership to help combat the problem and strengthen the working climate (where we need to go). It is therefore advised that the researcher be well versed in the application of this process and not allow the participants to exert complete control on the direction to be taken; the intent is to produce useful information for the customer.

Focus Group Data Collection and Analysis

Focus group data collection and analysis involves the review of all transcriptions, notes, and any other content obtained for the purpose of scrutiny for thematic trends (Gelo et al., 2008). The compiled data is systematically reviewed for recurring trends, and then grouped together and

coded. The coding process allows for grouping together evidence and thoroughly identifying categorized or clustered and expansive perspectives (Gelo et al., 2008). There are various computer programs available to assist in analyzing text-based data. One such example is a software program called The Ethnograph, which Siskind and Kearns (1997) share was useful in enhancing analysis "by performing frequency analyses of codes, and by allowing the researchers to review the text by coded segments" (p. 504).

Focus Group Usefulness

Besides the apparent usefulness of the focus group to reveal employee perceptions regarding sexual harassment, the approach also may offer insight into the employees' perceived needs for program evaluation and organizational improvements, which can translate intto strategic advances (Morgan, 1996). Further, from a diversity enhancement perspective, the focus group can be a helpful tool toward providing a channel for marginalized groups to feel they have been given the power of expressing themselves with their peers as witness to their experience and observations (Morgan, 1996).

Conclusion

When faced with providing assistance to an organization on the efficacy of a sexual harassment prevention initiative, an I/O psychologist will have many research methods and processes at their disposal. However, many factors will likely weigh into the decision of research, data collection, and type of analysis. These include the I/O psychologist's forte of methodological approach, the organization's expectations regarding the type of information desired for policy or project implementation, as well as the parameters of funding (Bryman, 2007).

When approaching the prospect of providing assistance to an organization on a sexual harassment prevention initiative, the author subscribes to the advice given by Davey and Davidson (2000) to also suggest that all forms of harassment (i.e., sexual, racial, ethnic, as well as unlawful discrimination) are considered by the organization so an all-encompassing approach can be designed and implemented, if needed. This strategic approach can serve an organization well in communicating a complete and thought-out anti-discrimination policy toward building a healthy working environment. While organization leaders may exert direct control over systems and policies, Fuqua and Newman (2002) reveal that it is the individual employees who have more control than they probably realize or wish to acknowledge; thus, it is an astute I/O psychologist who will stay mindful of that leveraging potential and build upon it.

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