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REVIEW ARTICLE

Response rate in industrial surveys conducted in India: Trends and implications

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Abstract Despite a growth in the number of India-focussed articles appearing in leading business journals, there has not been a systematic review of response rate to surveys conducted in India. India differs significantly from Western nations not only in its cultural norms but also in its practical difficulties of doing empirical research. We analysed more than 2000 studies published in 26 refereed academic journals. We find that the average response rate for an organisational level survey is significantly lower while for individual level respondent groups it is significantly higher than those reported in the Western context. Results, implications and recommendations are discussed.

Introduction

Organisational researchers use surveys as one of the predominant methodologies for gathering data. The survey is a method of gathering information or data in a consistent or systematic way. Data can be collected from an entire population or from a sample of the population. While the former is referred to as census and is generally carried out by the governing authorities in ascertaining community or population specific statistics, the latter mode of getting data from a sample of population is often the general method of eliciting information in organisational and behavioural research. Organisational surveys can offer insights into a variety of phenomena including individual attitudes and perceptions as well as organisational policies and practices (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). In a survey where the respondents participate voluntarily, it is unusual that everyone responds to the questionnaire as it is up to the target audience to decide whether to participate or not. Unless a questionnaire is compulsorily administered to a captive audience, rarely does one achieve a 100 per cent response rate. Response rate (RR) here is the ratio of the number of usable questionnaires to those sent out and is an important factor in determining the quality of the study.

There are distinct benefits and limitations to using response rate as an indicator of study quality. The advantage of having high response rates is that it indicates larger data

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samples and higher statistical power, leading to a greater probability that the sample is representative of a population (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). This improves acceptance and credibility of the research findings amongst key stakeholders. On the other hand, smaller data samples decrease statistical power, increase confidence interval and may constrain the type of statistical technique that can be used (Anseel, Lievens, Schollaert, & Choragwicka, 2010; Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). If systematic differences between respondents and non-respondents are present, the findings of the study may not be generalisable to the entire population. This systematic difference between respondents and non-respondents becomes exacerbated as the number of respondents reduces. If respondents differ from non-respondents in their attitudes and beliefs, low response rates will make the survey unrepresentative of the population under study (Porter, 2004) and threaten the external validity of the conclusions drawn (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). However even when the response rates are high, the potential for error still exists while non-response bias is not a foregone conclusion in the case of low response rate (Cook, Heath & Thompson, 2000; Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). Hence it could be argued that RR in itself is not the sole criterion for assessing study quality, but one of the indicators to assess the potential contribution of a study (Campion, 1993; Cook et al., 2000). The RR information makes a useful reference when combined with the information by the authors on the efforts they have put in to increase response rates and how they have taken care of the non-respondent bias.

Despite the realisation that high response rates are useful, two primary reasons for non-response are 1) failure to deliver the questionnaires to the intended population and 2) the reluctance of people to respond (Baruch, 1999). Non-response due to mail returns, though not widely prevalent, creates a problem especially when there are increasing instances of employee mobility across organisations. Adequate preparation in the form of address checks and updating could mitigate the problem to a large extent. Further the growth of Web connectivity makes it easier to reach out to an otherwise mobile workforce by administering questionnaire links to the respondents' email addresses. A more serious concern is the reluctance of non-respondents to respond due to reasons such as time constraint, topic irrelevance, or company policies to not participate in surveys (Baruch & Holtom, 2008).

Previous researchers have highlighted various ways to increase participation in employee surveys (Anseel et al., 2010; Cycyota & Harrison, 2006; Roth & BeVier, 1998). Having multiple survey mailings, incentives to respond and personal follow-ups have been found to help increase the response rate (Cook et al., 2000) and have been widely followed. While some researchers (such as Yammarino, Skinner, & Childers, 1991) have found a significant positive relationship between follow-up and response rate, others have found either a non-significant (Roth & BeVier, 1998) or even a negative relationship (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). A similar finding exists between incentives and response rates wherein some have found a positive relationship while others have found a non-significant or even a negative relationship. In a study involving business executives, Keown (1985) found that monetary incentives increased response rate by 100 per cent in the Japanese context whereas in Hong Kong, incentives did not increase the response rate and in fact there was a reduction. One possible reason could be that depending on the respondent type, some response enhancing techniques could be more effective than others (Anseel et al., 2010). Additionally both incentives and follow-ups could be a consequence of low response rate rather than a contributor to response rates.

The theoretical studies pertaining to survey response could be divided into two groups—one is based on reasoned action and the other considers response to surveys as a psychological process, viewing the decision to participate as a heuristic (Porter, 2004). The reasoned action approach relies on the social exchange theory where three elements are critical for predicting a particular action: rewards, costs, and trust (Dillman, 2000). In the context of survey administration it refers to the rewards that the respondents expect by participating in the survey, the costs associated with participation, and whether perceived rewards outweigh perceived cost in the long run. By offering monetary or non-monetary incentives or a report based on the survey, one could increase the rewards of participation. Costs of participation in the survey are in the form of time, energy, and resources required to undertake the survey. This could be reduced by various means such as reducing the length of the questionnaire, soliciting information at a time and place convenient to the respondents, and making the questions precise and easy to read. The trust in a survey context could be established by alleviating apprehensions of any negative repercussions that may be feared because of participation. This could be partially addressed by ensuring anonymity to the respondents and also soliciting information through a social circle. The psychological heuristics approach considers the norms of reciprocity, helping tendencies, compliance with legitimate authority, and perceptions of scarcity (Groves, Cialdini, & Couper, 1992) as ways to increase response rates. Norms of reciprocity could explain why a token incentive may not outweigh the cost of participation but can still motivate the respondent to participate in the survey. Helping tendencies are more intrinsic to the respondent groups, while compliance with authority could be a response to positional power. The survey would focus on understanding these theory derived influences in improving response rate.

Although the study of response rate for various respondent groups has been carried out in the Western context for many years, it is scant in cross national mail surveys (Harzing, 2000; Lyness & Kropf, 2007) and largely non-existent in the Indian context. Even in cross-national mail survey analysis, India has not been a referent for analysing RR. There has been an increasing interest in conducting cross-national surveys amongst researchers, not only to understand the attitudinal differences across national geographies in a multi-national context, but also amongst scholars who want to examine the generalisability of their theories and research findings to different cultural contexts (Lyness & Kropf, 2007).

India is fast emerging as a destination for conducting and reporting large scale empirical research in top tier organisational journals. For instance, the Apri1 2012 special issue of Journal of World Business is focussed on "employment related research in the Indian context"; the June 2010 issue of Human Resource Management was focussed on studying "emerging patterns of HRM in the new Indian economic environment" and a special issue in 2012 in The International Journal of Human Resource Management was devoted to "HRM in the new economy in India". Additionally, re-