



Conducting field experiments using eLancing's natural environment[☆]

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ABSTRACT

We propose the use of eLancing as a natural environment to conduct field experiments in entrepreneurship research. eLancing, or Internet freelancing, involves millions of people around the world and consists of websites that link individuals and organizations interested in purchasing services or commissioning people to complete some type of work with individuals and organizations interested in providing such services or performing such work. We provide a description of how to conduct practically feasible field experiments using eLancing's natural environment to investigate important substantive areas such as entrepreneurial team efficacy and how execution differs from opportunity recognition, among other areas. Using eLancing to conduct field experiments allows researchers to overcome pervasive methodological challenges as revealed by a content analysis of the 175 empirical articles published in the *Journal of Business Venturing* from January 2005 to November 2010. Specifically, eLancing allows researchers to improve generalizability, address the omitted variables problem, improve the operationalization of constructs, improve confidence regarding the nature of causal relationships, and address other challenges such as participant bias and selective survival. Thus, using eLancing as a methodological tool has the potential to lead to important theoretical advancements and subsequent practical applications.

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1. Executive summary

Theoretical contributions in the field of entrepreneurship are more likely to occur if we improve our methodological tools. We conducted a content analysis of the 175 empirical articles published in *Journal of Business Venturing* (JBV) in the five-year period between January 2005 to November 2010 and uncovered that authors report that the most pervasive methodological challenges are lack of generalizability (30.49%), omitting measurement of an important variable (19.76%), less than ideal operationalization of constructs (16.52%), and lack of confidence regarding causality (10.62%). In other words, taken together, these four issues account for about 77% of all methodological challenges reported by JBV authors in the past five years.

We propose the use of eLancing as a natural environment to conduct field experiments that overcome each of the most pervasive methodological challenges. eLancing, or Internet freelancing, is a rapidly growing work arrangement worldwide. The eLancing work environment is called a “marketplace,” which is a website that connects individuals interested in purchasing services or commissioning people to complete some type of work with individuals and organizations interested in providing such services or performing such work. Thus, eLancing allows individuals from anywhere in the world to sign up and complete work using the Internet for a client who may also be anywhere in the world. Entrepreneurs buy and sell services using eLancing, and this turns eLancing into an ideal but as of yet undiscovered methodological tool for conducting field (i.e., natural) experimental

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research. We provide an overview of eLancing, including its origins and use worldwide. Also, we describe how to use eLancing as a natural environment to conduct experiments that allow entrepreneurship scholars to overcome each of the most frequently encountered methodological challenges in the field as reported by JBV authors and also as uncovered by our independent third-party coding of articles. We also provide a step-by-step description of the practical and logistical steps involved in conducting a field experiment using eLancing to study entrepreneurial team efficacy. In addition, we describe how to use eLancing to conduct experiments addressing other substantive domains and questions including how execution differs from opportunity recognition, how information asymmetry affects creativity and innovation, what are the internal processes in entrepreneurial teams (including cross-cultural teams), and how these processes unfold over time. Using eLancing's natural environment allows researchers to take advantage of all of the benefits that field experiments have to offer and also to conduct such experiments in a practical and cost-effective manner. Thus, conducting field experiments using eLancing allows researchers to improve both internal and external validity. Consequently, we hope our article will serve as a catalyst for the use of eLancing to conduct field experiments that will lead to theoretical advancements that will also translate into important practical applications.

2. Introduction

There is a documented need for methodological approaches that allow for the investigation of increasingly sophisticated causal processes involving actual entrepreneurs in natural environments (Gregoire et al., 2010b; Short et al., 2010b; Uy et al., 2010). Accordingly, the purpose of our article is to offer an innovative and novel methodological approach for conducting field experimental research using eLancing as a natural environment. eLancing, or Internet freelancing, involves millions of people around the world and consists of websites that link individuals and organizations interested in purchasing services or commissioning people to complete some type of work with individuals and organizations interested in providing such services or performing such work (Aguinis and Lawal, in press).

The remainder of our article is organized as follows. First, we describe an empirical study aimed at uncovering the most pervasive methodological challenges faced by entrepreneurship researchers. Second, we provide an overview of eLancing. Third, we describe how to use eLancing as a methodological tool. This section also provides a description of how using eLancing as a research tool allows entrepreneurship scholars to overcome each of the six most frequently reported methodological challenges (as uncovered through our content analysis). Fourth, we provide a step-by-step description of how to conduct a study using eLancing to investigate substantive domains. Finally, we close with a description of potential limitations and challenges of using eLancing to conduct field experimental research.

3. Methodological challenges faced by entrepreneurship researchers

We conducted a content analysis of self-reported methodological challenges as acknowledged by authors themselves in the "Discussion" sections of published articles. The goal of our empirical study was to identify the relative frequency with which researchers refer to various methodological challenges (cf. Brutus et al., 2010). In addition, we also coded each article from a "third-party" perspective in terms of the type of research design used in each study and then assessed discrepancies between self-reported versus third-party coded methodological challenges.

3.1. Criteria for inclusion

We examined articles published in *Journal of Business Venturing* (JBV) from January 2005 through November 2010. Our review focused on empirical contributions and excluded literature reviews, theoretical articles, editorial comments, and all other non-empirical articles. A total of 175 articles met these criteria.

3.2. Methods

Content analysis is primarily a qualitative methodology, but it also includes a quantitative component, which provides an advantage over other more purely qualitative methods such as literary interpretation and hermeneutics (Duriau et al., 2007; García-Izquierdo et al., 2010). We used a taxonomy of methodological challenges based on the threats to validity as defined by Cook and Campbell (1979), Shadish et al. (2002), and Scandura and Williams (2000). This taxonomy includes four types of issues that threaten the accuracy and veracity of conclusions derived from empirical research: (1) threats to statistical conclusion validity (i.e., whether there is a relationship between two variables), (2) threats to internal validity (i.e., whether there is a causal effect from one operational – as measured – variable to another), (3) threats to construct validity of putative causes and effects (i.e., whether there is a causal effect from one construct to another), and (4) threats to external validity (i.e., whether the relationship between constructs generalizes across persons, settings, and time). We compiled a list including 28 different methodological challenges. Although we classified each challenge within one type of validity threat only, some of the challenges can affect more than one type of validity evidence.

3.3. Results and discussion

The second author conducted the coding of all methodological challenges reported in each of the 175 articles. This process involved classifying each challenge into one of the 28 categories included in Table 1. The first author randomly selected 10 articles

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