

Professional Competencies of
*Qualitative
Research
Consultants*

*Developed by:
The Professionalism Committee of the*



QUALITATIVE
RESEARCH
CONSULTANTS
ASSOCIATION

APRIL 2003

© 2003 QRCA



Background

What does it mean to be a professional Qualitative Research Consultant (QRC)? How can one determine what is and what is not “professional” behavior in the practice of qualitative research consulting? Today, the QRCA has a set of ethical standards that members sign and agree to abide by. The first of these is “to conduct qualitative research in a professional manner...” With the document that follows, the Professionalism Committee of the QRCA has attempted to specify what is meant by “professional manner.”

Since the inception of the qualitative research profession, many QRCs have developed practices and approaches that they used as guidelines for their own “professional” behavior. To date, however, no concerted effort has been made to codify these practices and approaches for the qualitative research industry worldwide. In order to ensure that the industry and its practitioners continue to develop and mature, it is essential to have a shared and explicit definition of the specific competencies that define “professional behavior.”

The Qualitative Research Consultants Association has endorsed the competencies specified in this document as those which define professional behavior for QRCs. The QRCA urges the entire qualitative research industry to adopt these competencies (subject to periodic review) as a significant step toward raising the level of professionalism in qualitative research.

Purposes

Among other purposes, these competencies can be used to:

- Identify and define the skills, traits and practices that constitute the professional conduct of qualitative research consultants;
- Provide QRCs with a framework for self-evaluation, identifying areas of accomplishment and opportunity for continued growth;
- Create a framework for education by developing and evaluating curricula for QRCs in an ever-expanding and diversifying global society;
- Assist clients in identifying the performance they seek and evaluating the performance they receive.

Benefits

Once accepted as professional norms, these competencies can benefit individual qualitative researchers and the profession as a whole in many ways. Some of these include:

- Setting expectations by issuing an explicit statement of the nature of professionalism for qualitative research.
- Improving the collective performance of QRCs, thereby improving the image and prestige of our profession.
- Identifying areas of growth for QRCs by self-analyzing one’s skill level on each competency.
- Creating a forum for the discussion and inclusion of diverse perspectives on our profession while emphasizing our areas of consensus.

Overview

The following identifies and defines 11 competencies of QRCs. Competencies are what outstanding professionals apply more often, in more situations, and with better results, than average professionals. Skills, knowledge, abilities and the like are necessary to do the job; competencies are the personal applications of these attributes that make a professional outstanding. We have specified the kinds of competencies (knowledge, skills, behavior, beliefs, values, traits and motives that indicate superior performance) that we believe are exhibited by top-notch professional qualitative research consultants. We group these competencies under three categories: Consulting, Research, and Professional/Business Practices.

Some elements of the eleven competencies may overlap, yet we believe that they reflect sufficiently important differences in emphasis to merit separate categories. The order of categories implies no judgment about their relative importance. Each of these may be mastered at four different levels: associate, professional, expert, and leader/innovator.

Consulting

1. **Consulting:** Focuses effectively on improving the client's situation; establishes rapport and fully understands client needs; creates and implements a research process to meet the client's needs and objectives; and develops insightful, data-based recommendations that add value for the client.
2. **Content Knowledge:** Has general knowledge of the area of consulting (for example, business, health care, or social policy); has knowledge of the disciplines relevant to that area (for example, marketing, management, psychology, public health, anthropology, sociology, political science). This foundation of knowledge enables the consultant quickly to understand unfamiliar specific issues and relate them to qualitative research on which to construct valuable recommendations.

Research

3. **Conceptualization and Design:** Recasts client's stated problem into relevant research issues and designs appropriate research to collect and analyze data to address those issues.
4. **Research:** Understands and applies the social science research process, including the differences and appropriate conditions for application of qualitative and quantitative research and common specific research applications.
5. **Interviewing:** Knows and applies interviewing principles resulting in a sense of psychological safety and rapport with respondents. Is sensitive to culture and context; recognizes and understands variables that may influence study dynamics and results (for example, education, literacy level, gender, lifestyle, socioeconomic status, race, familial status and age).

Encourages individuals and groups to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas openly and honestly; derives understanding from verbal and non-verbal subtleties, nuances, body language, and other auditory and visual cues (as appropriate); understands widely differing points of view among respondents in their own terms.

6. **Analysis:** Understands verbal, visual, aural and other forms of qualitative input and analyzes them to develop client-relevant themes well substantiated by these observations.

Professional and Business Practices

7. **Communication:** Actively and accurately listens to all parties in the research consulting process (clients, respondents, suppliers, colleagues and others); writes insightful, clear reports; delivers effective oral presentations in a variety of formal and informal settings, whether prepared or spontaneous.
8. **Professional Practices:** Maintains a personal commitment to honesty (refusal to distort the truth) and integrity (putting values into action). Understands and acknowledges the strengths and limits of her or his knowledge and capabilities as well as the strengths and limits of qualitative research; understands and is committed to upholding the principles outlined in the QRCA Code of Member Ethics and Professional Practices.

9. **Project Management/Coordination:** Sets up, implements, and monitors complex projects, either alone or with staff and/or subcontractors, in timely, cost-efficient ways that effectively meet client needs.
10. **Business Practices:** Runs an economically sustainable business (profit or non-profit) operated within all applicable laws and regulations. Develops and sustains business through increasing depth of relationships with clients and earning repeat business and referrals; reaches prospective clients with appealing and beneficial offers of services; engages in good-faith negotiations; develops and maintains mutually beneficial relationships with clients, associates, and suppliers; makes consulting and supplier agreements consistent with both business ethics and law; has a clear understanding of the implications of the Code of Member Ethics and Professional Practices regarding information that may or may not be divulged to each party involved in the research process.
11. **Commitment to the Profession:** Moves the profession forward, elevating it in the eyes of the public; acts with the understanding that one's actions may go beyond the immediate client and project, influencing the entire profession and larger society; demonstrates a willingness to give back to the profession, by sharing, publishing, teaching, and encouraging other qualitative research consultants; builds and improves upon existing techniques and pioneers new techniques.

Comment and Feedback

Development of the competencies is an evolving and continuing process. The documents will continue to be revised and developed by the Professionalism Committee of the QRCA, and we appreciate any comments and feedback. Please forward your thoughts via email to Robert W. Kahle at rwkahle@concentric.net or to J.R. Harris at 72114.1500@compuserve.com.

Acknowledgements

The Professionalism Committee of the QRCA: J.R. Harris (Chair), Robert W. Kahle (Vice Chair), Diane Harris (Secretary), George Balch, Jean Craciun, Christopher Herbert, Linda LaScola, John Patterson, Barbara Rosenthal and George Silverman. Kahle led the subcommittee of Balch, Silverman and J.R. Harris which developed the competencies and Self-Evaluation Instrument.

The Professionalism Committee wishes to thank all of those many individuals – QRCA members, non-members, industry leaders, clients, facility owners and competency specialists – who have helped us in the development of these documents by providing information, insights, and feedback. Their contributions were invaluable and are much appreciated.

To receive a copy of the Self-Evaluation Instrument become a member of the QRCA by going to www.qrca.org.



Developed by:
The Professionalism Committee of the
Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA)
April 2003

www.qrca.org

© QRCA