

RESEARCH METHODS

Lecture Title:

Finding and Using Documents and Organisational Evidence

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**Masters in
Human Resources Management**

Main Lecture Outline

- Different forms of documentary evidence
- Using data from organisational management information systems
- Finding and selecting secondary data sources
- Analysing documentary and organisational information



What This Lecture Will Cover in Detail

- **Understanding Existing Data:**

The types of information that already exist within an organisation, including documents, reports, records and digital files.

- **Why Existing Data Matters:**

The importance to check what information is already available before collecting new data. This helps save time and can improve the quality of your research.



- **Types of Secondary Data:** Exploring different forms of secondary data, such as internal reports, financial records, emails, meeting minutes, databases and publicly available information about the organisation.
- **How to Use Secondary Data in Research:** Explaining how secondary data can support your research questions, either on its own or together with primary data that you collect yourself.
- **Secondary Data vs. Literature Review:** Discussing the difference between data used for your literature review and data used directly in your research project.
- **Practical Considerations:** Judging whether existing data is reliable, relevant and suitable for your study.



Case Example : Hybrid Work and Leadership Styles

- **Who?**
Chloe, a distance-learning student, recently joined the head office of a large retail organisation. She works in HR for head office staff.
- **Context:**
After Covid-19, the organisation introduced **hybrid working**:
3 days in the office, 2 days from home.
However, some departments still work **5 days in the office**, even though hybrid work is official policy.
- **Research Focus:**
Chloe wants to study:

Leadership style of line managers

Employees' willingness to work in a hybrid way

She believes managers' attitudes towards hybrid work influence whether employees adopt it.

- **Research Method:**
Chloe plans to:
Use a **questionnaire** to ask staff if leaders' views affect their willingness to work hybrid.
Her supervisor suggests also using **existing organisational data**
(HR records, attendance data) to support her research.

- **Discussion questions**
- In addition to the data from the questionnaire that Chloe planned for her research, what other forms of organisational evidence might be relevant for this study? Try and list about four sources of evidence.
- What difficulties might Chloe have in trying to locate and utilise the information you have identified?



Potential Sources of Organisational Information

- **Policy documents** (e.g., management handbooks)
- **Meeting records** and minutes
- **Staff updates** after policy changes
- **Visual evidence** (photos of workspaces and interactions)
- **System data** (e.g., scheduling software for meetings)



Why These Sources Matter

- Save time and effort
- Avoid duplicating data
- Provide real insight into how things work in practice
- Help combine organisational evidence with your own research



Examples from Chloe's Case

- Management handbooks and hybrid work policies
- Records of management meetings
- Documents sent to staff about policy changes
- Photos showing office use and informal interactions
- Data on face-to-face and virtual meetings from scheduling software



Benefits and Challenges

Benefits

- Easy to access
- Often unobtrusive
- Adds depth to research

Challenges

- Policies may not match reality
- Reports from systems can be hard to interpret
- Time-consuming to get access and format data



Key Message

- Always check what data already exists
- Avoid collecting data that duplicates existing information
- Judge if data is **reliable**, **relevant**, and **suitable** for your study



What We Will Cover in Practice Today

Different forms of **organisational evidence** that are useful for research

How to **find documents** about organisations

How to **choose what is most relevant and useful**

Ways to **make sense of the information** these documents provide

Practical tips for using organisational evidence effectively



Sources of Information About an Organisation

Imagine you know absolutely nothing about an organisation.

You cannot contact any people (verbally or in writing).

You can only access documents within the company.

Task :

Produce a list of all sources of information that might help you learn about the organisation:

- Its purpose
- Its culture
- Its business operations

Include different kinds of evidence in your list, not just written forms of information.



Sources of Organisational Information

Wide Variety of Sources

- **Internal documents**
 - Emails, agendas, meeting minutes
 - Reports for working groups, project proposals, progress reports
- **External marketing information**
 - Company website
 - Newspaper clippings, online news, trade journals, business books
- **Employee and business data**
 - Numbers, skills, length of service, turnover
 - Client base and market share
- **Financial information**
 - Published annual accounts
- **Existing datasets**
 - Large-scale surveys or commercial databases



Public and Non-Written Sources

- **Publicly available documents**

- MarketLine (via EBSCO Connect)
- Case-study articles from Emerald Insight and Web of Science

- **Non-written sources**

- Maps showing organisation sites
- Architectural plans of buildings
- Diagrams of production or workflow processes

- **Key point:**

If someone else has collected the right data and you can access it, **use it**.

This saves time and adds value to your research.



Making Use of Diaries and Autobiographies

Imagine you are researching HR issues in entrepreneurship.

As part of your background research, you read diaries and autobiographies of prominent 'self-made' business figures.

There are many of these sources, and you are not sure how useful they will be.

Task:

If you have time and interest, skim-read one such book.

If you cannot access a physical book, try searching online for previews using terms like *business autobiography*.

Discussion Questions:

- Why do business leaders (and others) publish their diaries and autobiographies?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using evidence from these sources?
- How can you tell which materials belong in a literature review and which can be used as part of your research?



Why Use Diaries and Autobiographies?

- These sources are created by people involved in events or issues
- They provide **background information** close to the actual events
- They can help explain context and personal perspectives
- Useful for understanding entrepreneurship and HR issues



Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages:

- Written by or authorised by those involved
- Close to real events and experiences
- Can give rich, detailed insights

Disadvantages:

- May be biased or selective
- Often written for future readers, not for research
- Commercial motives or desire to show a flattering image

How to Use Diaries and Autobiographies

- These sources were **not written for your research**, so read them carefully
- Think about **why the author wrote the book** (for money, fame or image)
- Use them to **explain the background** of your topic

Why Documentary Evidence is Useful

- **Gives clear details about events**
Example: Documents can show what happened before a big change in the organisation
- **Checks if interviews are accurate**
People remember events differently; documents can confirm the real order of events
- **Adds extra information to your research**
Example: Appraisal forms can show if goals were realistic
- **Different types of documentary evidence:**
 - Written documents (reports, meeting notes)
 - Photos, videos, maps, diagrams
 - Data from HR systems (e.g., employee records)

Important: These sources are often forgotten, you need careful planning, so you do not waste time on irrelevant data



Literature Review vs Research Data

- **Literature Review:**

- Use biographies and memoirs to **give examples and background**
- Example: Books about Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg
- These help explain the topic and show real-life cases

- **Research Data:**

- You can **analyse the content** of these books like you analyse interviews
- Look for patterns and themes in what they say
- This is called **content analysis** (studying words and ideas in the text)
- Helps you draw conclusions about entrepreneurship and HR issues



Using Data from Organisational Management Information Systems

- All organisations keep records about their employees
- These records can be a **valuable source of information** for research
- Examples of what you can find:
 - Employee numbers, job roles, length of service
 - Training records, absence data, turnover rates
- **Why use this data?**
 - It can help you compare information across time periods
 - It can show differences between departments
 - It can help you identify areas for deeper research
- **Important points:**
 - These records rarely give direct answers to your research questions
 - Do not waste time on long lists of numbers or statistics that do not explain anything
 - Plan carefully how this data will help you answer your research questions



Activity – Research Issues with Management Information Systems

Imagine you are researching the employment of disabled people in your organisation.

The HR information system contains:

- Details of declared disabilities
- Historical data on pay, grading and disability for the last 10 years
- Linked to payroll system for the last 5 years

Access conditions:

- You can only get **quantitative reports** (numbers and summaries)
- You cannot view individual employee records
- You must follow rules on **anonymity, confidentiality and data protection**

Discussion Questions:

1. What reports would help you understand the experiences of disabled employees?
2. What challenges might you face in getting this information?
3. What issues should you consider when using these reports?



Why HR Information Systems Are Important

- HR systems store data about employees (e.g., pay, grades, disability status)
- These systems make research easier compared to 20 years ago
- They allow you to look at patterns over time or across departments
- Example: Comparing pay or bonuses for disabled employees over 10 years



Examples of Useful Reports

- Number of male and female staff with declared disabilities at each grade
- Bonus payments or awards for disabled employees over 10 years
- Average pay for disabled employees (year, month, week, hour)
- Proportion of disabled employees working part-time
- Comparison of pay between disabled and non-disabled employees
- Length of service for disabled employees



Challenges in Getting This Data

- **System functionality:** Can the HR system create these reports?
- Many systems store data well but struggle to produce custom reports
- You may need help from **system experts** (people who know the system well)
- Downloading data to spreadsheets may not be allowed due to privacy rules



Skills and Time Needed

- Even if reports can be generated, you may need time to learn the system
- You must plan for training and practice to interpret the data correctly
- Allow enough time for this in your research schedule



Key Issues to Consider

- **Access:** Data protection rules limit what you can see
 - No names or personal identifiers allowed
- **Quality and reliability:**
 - Are records updated regularly?
 - Were codes changed during system upgrades?
- **System set-up:**
 - Is recent data more accurate than older data?
 - Have all employees declared disabilities?



Stay Focused on Research Questions

- HR systems contain a lot of data
- Avoid wasting time on information that is “nice-to-have” but not needed
- Always ask: Does this data help answer my research question?



Why This Data Is Valuable

- Helps you answer meaningful research questions
- Can show patterns and trends over time
- Helps you check if survey results are representative
- In some projects, HR system data can be the main source of evidence



Finding and Selecting Appropriate Secondary Data Sources

Activity – Using Online Community Contributions as Data

Imagine you are researching HR issues related to stress at work and mental health.
You want to understand these issues from the perspective of HR practitioners.

Task:

- Visit HR discussion forums (e.g., CIPD Community, FHRD (Malta), HR Grapevine, Personnel Today)
- Find discussion threads with many postings (not just many views)
- Skim-read contributions to identify key opinions and experiences
- Visit HR blogs (e.g., CIPD blogs) and compare the information with forums

Discussion Questions:

1. How can this type of information help your research?
2. What problems might arise if you only study these postings?
3. What do these postings NOT tell you?



Advantages of Organisational Evidence

- You can study documents many times (not time-limited)
- Unobtrusive: Does not disturb employees or their work
- Gives exact details of events, names and numbers
- Shows trends over time and across locations
- Useful for long-term analysis when time for other methods is short



Disadvantages of Organisational Evidence

- Hard to find and access all relevant sources
- Information may be incomplete or biased
- Author's perspective or motive is unknown
- Organisation may refuse access for confidentiality reasons
- Difficult to know if documents caused an event or were created after it



How to Maximise Advantages

- Think carefully about what information you need
- Identify and categorise helpful sources
- Locate where these sources are stored
- Select material that is most relevant to your research questions
- Avoid choosing sources that only confirm what you already believe



Evaluating Organisational Evidence

Ask these questions:

- What kind of source is it?
- What does it actually say?
- Who produced it and why?
- What was the context when it was created?
- Is it typical or unusual for its time?
- Is it complete or edited?
- What do we know about the author's background?



Key Criteria for Evaluation

- **Authenticity and credibility:**
 - Is the information accurate?
 - Compare with other sources (e.g., HR system vs website)
- **Representativeness:**
 - Does it reflect the whole organisation or just one part?
 - Example: HR views vs marketing or finance views
- **Meaning and significance:**
 - Understand the culture and language used
 - Words may mean different things in different countries or organisations
 - Example: "Strategy" can have different meanings across firms



Imagine that you came across the following document on the internet site of a large university as part of your research into social media policy in employing organisations in the UK.

Introduction and Scope

The University recognises that the internet provides unique opportunities to participate in interactive discussions and share information on various topics through a wide variety of media, including online social forums, blogs, video- and image-sharing websites and similar platforms.

The use of such online media sites has become a significant part of many people's lives, helping them stay in touch with friends and colleagues and exchange ideas and insights on shared interests, both personally and professionally.

However, the use of social media by students and employees of the University can pose risks to the University's confidential information, reputation and overall compliance with the law. To minimise such risks, the University expects its students and employees to comply with this policy regarding the use of social media.

This policy applies to the personal use of social media by students and employees of the University. If such personal use does not reference the University and the University cannot be identified, the content is unlikely to be of concern to the University.

If students are encouraged to use social media as part of their studies, in the absence of a formal policy, such use should be conducted in line with the spirit and intent of this policy.



Guidelines for Use of Social Media

Students and staff are free to use social media, but if they mention the University or can be linked to it, they must make it clear they are speaking in a personal capacity. Students and staff are responsible for everything they post online, and content can remain public for a long time and may affect future employment or career prospects.

Social media must not be used to abuse, threaten or offend others. Students and staff should respect privacy, avoid discriminatory or false statements, and must not post illegal, misleading, or inappropriate content. Permission should be obtained before sharing images or information about others.

Students and staff may discuss the University online, but untrue or damaging comments that harm its reputation may result in disciplinary action. If contacted by the media about University-related content, students and staff should contact the Director of Communications. Any inappropriate content linked to the University should be reported to the Head of Registry. Social media must not be used to access or share illegal material.



Compliance with related policies and agreements

All the University's other policies which might apply to the use of social media remain in full force and effect. Social media should never be used in a way that violates any other University policies or obligations relating to employees or students. If your post would violate any of the University's policies in another forum, it will also violate them in an online forum. If there is any conflict between this policy and any of the other relevant University policies, then the more restrictive policy shall take precedence.



Evaluate this document using the questions shown below:

- What kind of 'document' is it? Is it authentic and credible?
- Who produced it and for what purpose? What is known about the author's/authors' background and experience?
- What was the context of its production?
- Is it typical and representative of such documents or exceptional for its time?
- To what extent is its meaning clear?
- Is it complete – has it been altered or edited?
- In what ways is this a useful document and what other information would you require if you were researching into social media policy in employing organisations in the UK?



Academic Evaluation of the Policy

- The policy appears **authentic and credible**, as it is published on the website of a large, reputable UK university.
- Its **purpose and intended meaning** are clear, particularly in relation to acceptable social media behaviour and protection of the University's reputation.
- The policy provides **limited evidence of actual practice**, as it does not show whether staff and students are aware of it or comply with it.
- The **authorship is unclear**, and there is no information about whether students, staff or other stakeholders contributed to its development.
- As a **university-based policy**, it may not be representative of social media policies in other sectors, especially private organisations.
- The policy is suitable as secondary data for analysing stated organisational values, but must be used alongside other data sources, such as interviews, survey or case studies to support academic analysis and improve validity.



Activity – Using Secondary Data from Large Surveys (Malta)

Scenario:

You want to study the relationship between employee skills and pay among employees in Malta.

Collecting data from many organisations yourself would take too much time and cost.

Solution: Use **secondary data** from large surveys already collected by trusted organisations.

Why use secondary data?

- Saves time and money
- Covers a large number of employees and organisations
- Provides reliable and structured information

Discussion Questions:

- How can this type of data help your research?
- What are the main sources for secondary data in Malta?
- What challenges might you face when using these datasets?

Possible Sources in Malta:

National Statistics Office (NSO Malta):

Labour Force Survey (LFS)
Employment and Earnings Statistics
Skills and Education Reports
<https://nso.gov.mt>

Eurostat:

EU Labour Force Survey (includes Malta)
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>

Jobsplus Malta:

Employment trends and skills data
<https://jobsplus.gov.mt>

European Skills and Jobs Survey (CEDEFOP):

Skills mismatch and training data
<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu>



Feedback for Using Secondary Data in Malta

1. Applicability in HR Research

- Secondary data from large surveys is widely used in fields like economics, finance and strategy but it is equally relevant for HR research in Malta.
- It allows you to explore relationships between variables such as **employee skills and pay**, turnover rates, recruitment patterns, and workforce demographics.
- The advantage lies in uncovering new patterns within existing datasets (Easterby-Smith et al., 2022).



2. Benefits

- **Cost and Time Efficiency:** Collecting primary data from multiple organizations in Malta would be resource-intensive. Secondary data eliminates this burden.
- **Comprehensive Coverage:** National and EU-level surveys include thousands of employees and organizations, giving you a broad and representative sample.
- **Reliability:** Data from NSO Malta, Eurostat, Jobsplus, and CEDEFOP is structured and validated, ensuring credibility.



3. Main Sources for Malta

- **NSO Malta:** Labour Force Survey (LFS), Employment and Earnings Statistics, Skills and Education Reports (nso.gov.mt)
- **Eurostat:** EU Labour Force Survey (includes Malta) (Eurostat LFS)
- **Jobsplus Malta:** Employment trends and skills data (jobsplus.gov.mt)
- **CEDEFOP:** European Skills and Jobs Survey (cedefop.europa.eu)

These sources provide raw datasets for statistical analysis and published reports for descriptive insights.



4. Challenges

- **Access Restrictions:** Some datasets may require registration or fees.
- **Data Complexity:** Large surveys contain many variables; selecting relevant ones for your research question is critical.
- **Comparability Issues:** Definitions of skills or pay may differ across surveys.
- **Risk of Duplication:** Other researchers may have analyzed similar relationships; review existing literature to avoid redundancy.



5. Practical Tips

- Check if Malta-specific subsets exist within EU-wide surveys (e.g., Eurostat LFS).
- Use reports for trend analysis (e.g., skills mismatch over five years).
- Combine multiple sources for richer insights (e.g., NSO + Jobsplus for pay and skills data).

Analysing Documentary and Organisational Information in HR Research

- *Activity – Researching Harassment and Bullying*

Why Analyse Policies?

- Policies reflect **organisational values and compliance** with legal standards.
- They show **formal procedures** for handling harassment and bullying.
- Useful for:
 - Comparing approaches across organisations.
 - Identifying gaps between policy and practice.
 - Understanding cultural and sectoral differences.



Steps to Make Sense of Policy Documents

1. Collect Policies

Use search engines to find public sector harassment and bullying policies.

2. Organise Documents

Categorise by sector (health, education, government).

3. Identify Key Themes

Definitions of harassment and bullying.

Reporting procedures.

Support mechanisms for victims.

4. Compare and Contrast

Similarities and differences in language and enforcement.

5. Check Alignment

Compare with national legislation and international standards.



Documentary Analysis can include Images

- Navigate to the **Images** section of your search.
- Select 2–3 images that represent harassment and bullying (e.g., workplace conflict, isolation).
- **How to Analyse Images:**
 - Look for **symbols and metaphors** (e.g., isolation, aggression).
 - Consider **emotional tone** (fear, stress, exclusion).
 - Relate to HR concepts (psychological safety, organisational culture).
- Use images to **illustrate findings** or as **qualitative data** in your research.



Why Include Image Analysis?

- Adds a **visual dimension** to understanding workplace harassment.
- Helps explain **perceptions and attitudes**.
- Useful for:
 - Training materials.
 - Awareness campaigns.
 - Supporting qualitative findings.



Practical Tips

01

Always **cite sources** of policies and images.

02

Ensure **ethical use** of images (avoid identifiable individuals).

03

Combine **documentary analysis** with other methods (e.g., interviews, surveys) for richer insights.

Induction and Deduction in Analysing Organisational Evidence (Lecture 5)

Induction

Starts with **specific observations** or evidence (e.g. organisational policies, reports).

- Builds towards **general theories or patterns**.

Example: Analyse several harassment policies → Identify common themes → Develop a theory about organisational culture.

Deduction

Starts with **existing theory or hypothesis**.

- Tests theory against **specific organisational evidence**.

Example: Theory: "Clear reporting procedures reduce bullying."

Examine policies to see if procedures exist and correlate with outcomes.



Inductive Approach – Further Explained

Definition:

Builds theory from organisational evidence without starting from an existing framework.

Process:

- Examine documents in their organisational context.
- Organise data into categories that emerge naturally.
- Interpret patterns and draw conclusions.

Example:

Analyse multiple harassment policies → Identify common themes
→ Develop a new conceptual model.



Deductive Approach – Further Explained

- **Definition**

Uses an existing theory or framework as the basis for analysis.

- **Process**

- Start with a theory from literature.
- Apply it to organisational evidence (e.g., policies, reports).
- Assess whether practice aligns with theory.

- **Example**

If theory says, “formal grievance procedures reduce bullying,” check if organisational documents show these procedures.



Choosing an Approach

Yin (2018):

Suggests researchers should choose either inductive or deductive.

Reality:

Boundaries are not always clear.

Different evidence types may suit different approaches.

Mixed Use:

Combining both can be appropriate (Gill et al., 2010; Saunders et al., 2023; Bell et al., 2022).



Practical Implications

Deductive:

Good for testing established theories.
Requires strong literature base.

Inductive:

Useful for exploring new patterns.
Requires careful categorisation and interpretation.

Combination:

Start deductively, then explore inductive insights for deeper understanding.



Why This Matters in HR Research

- Helps decide **how to analyse organisational documents** (policies, reports, training materials).
- Influences **research design** and **data interpretation**.
- Supports **rigorous and transparent methodology**



Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Organisational Evidence

Key Points

- Organisational evidence is **diverse** (policies, reports, adverts, etc.).
- Adds value to research **if collected and analysed systematically**.
- Must be treated with the same care as other research data.

Approaches

Qualitative Analysis:

Focus on meanings and themes.

Example: Interpret wording in job adverts or policies.

Quantitative Analysis:

Focus on numbers and measurable patterns

Example: Count adverts mentioning flexible work.

Combination

Some evidence suits **both approaches**.

- Example: Job adverts →
 - Qualitative: Analyse tone and inclusivity.
 - Quantitative: Count frequency of skills required.

A Further Example for Using Organisational Documents for HR Research

- Organisational evidence can include:
 - Job advertisements.
 - Policies and reports.
- These documents allow research **without direct access to organisations.**
- Example: Studying the effect of economic conditions on **learning & development roles.**



Activity – Categories for Analysis

Visit an online HR jobs site and go to the section which advertises training and development posts (for example, <https://pmjobs.cipd.co.uk/jobs/>).

Imagine that you are undertaking research into the effect of contemporary economic conditions on learning and development job roles. The site will provide you with information about a range of posts, with specific job descriptions, as well as potential salary information.

Discussion questions

Decide how you would go about analysing the information about role expectations for training and development professionals.

What opinions might you have about the sampling strategy for this approach to research?



Qualitative Analysis

- Examine **role expectations** in job descriptions.
- Identify:
 - Skills required.
 - Responsibilities.
 - Language used (e.g., emphasis on cost-efficiency or innovation).
- Helps understand **organisational priorities**.



Quantitative Analysis

- Collect numerical data:
 - Salary ranges.
 - Frequency of certain skills mentioned.
- Example:
 - Count adverts mentioning **flexible work** or **digital learning tools**.
- Enables trend analysis across multiple adverts



How to Analyse Role Expectations

Start by creating categories:

- Responsibilities of the job.
- Range and types of work.
- Levels of qualification expected.
- Job title.
- Salary.

Look for significant words:

- Examples: "strategic", "results orientated", "complex problems".
- Compare adverts to find patterns and differences.



Sampling Strategy – Key Considerations

Representativeness:

- One random week may not reflect the whole market.
- Job adverts change with time and economic conditions.

Source choice:

- Using only one website may not be representative.
- Consider other sources (LinkedIn, Xing, journals).

Better approach:

- Use multiple sources and different time periods.



Issues in Using Documentary Data

Sample Selection:

- Which media will you choose and why?
- What time period will you select?

Subjects and Themes:

- Decide main themes before collecting data.
- Will you use qualitative, quantitative or both?

Evaluating Sources:

- Who produced the document? (HR director, recruiter, etc.)
- What is the context? (Annual report, job advert, redundancy notice)

Coding and Categorising

- Summarise and organise data into categories.
- Record frequency of themes to show importance.
- Helps manage large amounts of text and numbers.
- Makes analysis systematic and clear.



See you
next week,
Thanks for paying attention!

