Adventures in the Field:
Conducting an Interpretive Case Study of Strategic Management Consultants

Valerie K. Spitler
University of North Florida, College of Business Administration
vspitler@unf.edu

Abstract

This paper presents the author's approach and experiences in conducting an interpretive case study [1] [2] of strategic management consultants. The purpose of the study was to understand how knowledge workers learn to use information technology in their work and to build theory related to this topic. The situated learning theory, legitimate peripheral participation [3], provided the basis for data collection and analysis. This paper discusses the research strategy and design; issues related to data collection, analysis and interpretation; ethical and validity considerations; and lessons learned, which confirm and extend those presented in texts about conducting field research (Section 5). This paper is intended to assist other researchers interested in conducting in-depth field studies in dynamic environments filled with information technology, especially when autonomous, highly educated knowledge workers are involved.

"...at base, all interpretive inquirers watch, listen, ask, record, and examine." - Schwandt, "Constructivist, Interpretivist Approaches to Human Inquiry" [4]

1. Introduction

This paper presents my experience conducting an interpretive case study of the use of information technology by strategic management consultants of the New York office of a global strategic management consulting firm (Arris Management Consulting, a pseudonym). The purpose of the study was to understand how knowledge workers learn to use information technology in their work and to build theory related to this topic. The situated learning theory, legitimate peripheral participation [3], provided the basis for data collection and analysis. This paper discusses the research strategy and design (Section 2), issues related to data collection, analysis and interpretation (Section 3), ethical considerations (Section 4), validity considerations (Section 5), and lessons learned, which confirm and extend those presented in texts, about conducting field research (Section 6). This paper is intended to assist other researchers interested in conducting in-depth field studies in dynamic environments filled with information technology, especially when autonomous, highly educated knowledge workers are involved.

The study can be described as an in-depth, interpretive case study [1] [2] with embedded units of analysis [5], and it relied on ethnographic methods such as participant observation [6]. While the design of the study was constrained by the topic under investigation [7], it was also a flexible design, molding to the specific organization, its design, work practices and culture [8].

2. Research Strategy and Design

This study was conducted from an interpretive perspective, and was guided by a theoretical framework developed from the situated learning theory, legitimate peripheral participation [3]. Interpretivism rests on the belief that "our knowledge of reality is a social construction by human actors... [and] value-free data cannot be obtained, since the enquirer uses his or her preconceptions in order to guide the process of enquiry and... interacts with the human subjects of the enquiry, changing the perceptions of both parties." [9] (p. 376) Thus, my approach was to gain understanding of phenomena through the meanings people assign to them by studying one organization in-depth, rather than to use a survey technique across multiple organizations. My field study, therefore, was not only based on a preliminary conceptual framework, but also used inductive, "constant comparative analysis" techniques [10] [11], so that the data generated categories, properties and interrelationships. This design allowed for studying knowledge workers in their natural, real-life work setting in order to understand the use of IT for performing knowledge work as a rich, social-cognitive process.

The research site was chosen to meet certain criteria that are relevant to the theory underlying the research, a principle known as theoretical sampling [5] [10]. Three criteria were deemed important for the theory. First, the...
site was required to have a high concentration of knowledge work. Second, the knowledge workers at the site were required to include both newcomers and old-timers. Third, use of IT for productive work had to be an integral part of the work. The site chosen met all three of these criteria and was a global, strategic management consulting firm, Arris Management Consulting.

3. Data Collection, Analysis and Interpretation

Data collection and analysis strategies were determined by following the principles proposed by [1] and [10]. Thus, data collection and analysis required giving consideration to not only the views and behaviors of individuals in the firm under study, but also to the context in which these individuals operate (fundamental principle of the hermeneutic circle [1]). Using these principles, I compared findings across different respondents, documents and observations, within the context of the consulting profession and the firm under study, and used my initial framework as a guide. Data collection and analysis were intertwined; analysis occurred as the data was collected and led to further data collection and analysis. The process itself was at least partially emergent [12].

I gained initial access to the firm in early October 1998. With the exception of not being able to attend client meetings or going to client sites, and the requirement to be unobtrusive, my access was relatively unrestricted, limited to my own initiative, imagination and time constraints. The primary data collection techniques were formal interviews (since consultants travel frequently and researcher access to client sites and meetings was not permitted) and participating in a week-long, off-site training session for new consultants. Secondary techniques included observations, collection and interpretation of firm documents, use of the firm-issued laptop computer, inclusion on voice and electronic mail distribution lists, and participation in some of the firm’s social activities. Consistent with ethnographic methods, I also kept a field notebook, recording how I spent my time at the site, my observations and thoughts, and issues for ongoing inquiry. I discuss each of these issues below: gaining access, conducting interviews, keeping field notebook, documents collected, participant observations, and use of consultants’ IT.

3.1. Gaining Access

Gaining access started the day I approached the Director of Human Resources about my research and ended the day I left my site. With each new person I met, I had to gain access.

My involvement with Arris lasted from October 1998 until July 1999, beginning with discussions with the firm’s director of Human Resources. She secured approval for me to be at Arris through her superior, and arranged with the firm’s legal department for me to sign a confidentiality agreement. (Note that to protect anonymity of the firm and participants, I have intentionally reported the incorrect gender for some of the participants; thus, no gender-related conjectures should be made based on data reported in this paper.) Following this initial approval, the Human Resources Director introduced me to others in the firm, such as some of the other staff partners and to the partners in charge of the New York office, the latter by means of a memo. The partner in charge of the NY consulting office then introduced me to the NY consulting staff via an e-mail memo and arranged for me to introduce myself personally to the NY consulting staff by giving a presentation about my research.

Through the HR Director I also obtained a building pass, required to gain physical access to Arris’s offices, and names of consultants and other employees in the New York office. She informed me that I would not be able to attend any client meetings or to visit client sites. She also set some of the early boundaries for my interaction with research participants. I was given a guest voice mailbox on Arris’s voice mail system; I was not permitted to have either a permanent phone number or office at Arris, and I was not permitted a connection to a printer at the firm.

My involvement with the HR director tapered off after the first month, and ended abruptly when I, along with employees in the firm, received a formal e-mail message from one of her superiors announcing a re-organization of the HR function, including her departure from the firm in March 1999. I received no forewarning of this event and, although I tried to see her before her departure, it was not to be. Within two weeks of the announcement she was no longer at the firm, and no one I talked to had any word of her plans. Note that I had one brief face-to-face meeting with her successor in March 1999 to obtain a formal sign-off on a paper I submitted to a conference, as required by the confidentiality agreement.

Following the departure of the original HR director, I feared that my days at Arris might be numbered or that participants might become less cooperative, so I continued my data collection in order to interview as many people as possible prior to any request to leave the firm. A natural departure time arrived when new people joined the firm at the beginning of the summer, and I was requested to abandon the temporary office I had been assigned.

Although the HR director gained formal permission for me to conduct research at Arris, gaining access continued throughout the project in informal ways with
each person I met. In one of the first meetings I had with the original HR director in October, she explained to me “You must share your research with these people; otherwise they will not talk to you. They will not find time to deal with you.” This, of course, created a quandary since by talking about my research I risked biasing the participants, and I devised several strategies for dealing with this problem throughout my research project. What she was telling me, in essence, was that with each new person I met I would have to gain access to that person.

For example, one of the first people to contact me was a consultant who had been with Arris for a few years. She expressed interest in my research largely because she was at a crossroads in her own career and was considering taking the academic route of getting a Ph.D. I spent time with this consultant describing my own experience as a Ph.D. student and giving my perspective on an academic career, and she answered many of my early questions at Arris, and helped me gain access to the other consultants, early in my research. (We had lunch together, and I introduced her to colleagues at my university and invited her to a research seminar there.) Although I found it natural to share in this way, I also recognized that creating relationships like this helped me reach my research goals. I felt myself in the ambiguous role of friendly advisor who likes to help people and create close relationships with people, but who knows that any close relationship in this situation cannot be completely selfless.

Access to a research site through a particular channel may bias the research, regardless of other precautions taken to avoid bias. For example, if research participants view the researcher as an agent of top management, they may refuse to participate in the research, withhold information or distort their actual view of organizational phenomena. As indicated, my entry at Arris occurred from the top, through the Human Resources Director and partner in charge of consultants, and from the bottom, through one of the consultants, who introduced me to other consultants. Thus, one of the strengths of the research is that I had a dual entry into the firm, both through 'management,' and through the 'workers,' i.e., consultants.

Some consultants were never available to meet with me. However, I ultimately interviewed about two-thirds of the New York consulting staff, and those I interviewed were willing participants. Many of the consultants were friendly towards me, and expressed a genuine interest in my work since they had considered doing a Ph.D. or were still considering it as a course of action following their stint at Arris. Few of the consultants I interviewed seemed reticent to speak frankly, and many welcomed the opportunity to discuss their work and to voice their opinions. Whether those consultants whom I did not interview represent another voice with respect to the issues I investigated, I cannot say.

Gaining access to the consulting (line) partners at the New York office was more difficult. However, I did interview three of them formally, another one of them was the facilitator for our group at the training session I attended off-site, and I observed others when they addressed the New York office in Friday meetings. Thus, my research study is somewhat biased, lacking a broad representation of the line New York partners.

The terms of my agreement with the organization limited my access to the organization in some respects, and other restrictions were more ephemeral. I was, however, able to overcome some apparent restrictions through my own self-initiative. I was prohibited from attending any client meetings or interacting with clients. Thus, my research does not incorporate Arris's clients, who were influential in setting expectations for and demands on Arris's consultants and partners working in project teams.

I was unable to attend the initial two-week training session offered the newest consultants, and I was denied access to the partner in charge of training until somewhat late in my data collection, since he had only recently taken over the position. Thus, access to Tools of the Trade and Orientation training was somewhat restricted. (See Section 3.5.) My data and analysis relied on comments from consultants during interviews and perusal of training materials from a prior year and from the European office. My study may have been stronger had I been able to attend this introductory training session.

However, I was able to attend the one-week, off-site Project Simulation Training, by making my own travel arrangements and paying for them from my own pocket. My participation in this training event gave me an insider's view of the work and life of management consultants. I also attended all other training sessions offered in the NY office. Therefore, I was able to benefit from a first-hand account of these other training events.

My agreement with the organization also called for me to finish my data collection within six months, and I was denied access to the building on weekends, even though consultants often worked on weekends. (In the end, my time from initial contact until collecting the final documentation lasted nine months.) Some restrictions were self-imposed. For example, I did not work the same long hours as consultants on site. Had I been on site during these "overtime" hours, I might have witnessed different behaviors by consultants.

Another self-imposed restriction concerned my interaction with consultants. As much as I felt that I would like to cultivate friendships with many of the consultants, I forced some distance between them and myself in order to remain unbiased, in their minds and in mine. Although some personal issues did come up in
the course of interviews, and personal experiences did
occur, my relationship with informants remained largely
professional. (For example, during the Project
Simulation Training, we played a game where we told
one truth and one lie about ourselves and let the group
guess which was the truth and which was the lie; the
purpose of the game was to encourage creating personal
relationships with people we would spend 10 hours a
day working closely within the confines of a hotel suite.
Our group also took a two-hour break one afternoon to
go for a walk and to go ice-skating. These experiences
forced people into somewhat vulnerable positions, such
as when they did not know how to ice skate, yet donned
skates anyway in front of the rest of the group, so that
they were required to expose some personal aspects of
themselves.) This was a Catch-22 because creating
personal relationships with others in consulting is
important for gaining trust and access, yet, I felt that
becoming too personal with select consultants might
bias my study. Further, I considered it unethical to
develop personal relationships with consultants and then
write about them in my research.

3.2. Conducting Formal Interviews

The interviewing was conducted in two stages. In the
first stage, which lasted about two months, I interviewed
a few high-level and low-level staff people and collected
documents to understand the company, its form,
product-service offering, culture, specialized vocabulary,
as well as the names and contact information of additional
research participants. These early interviews allowed me to make additional judgments about the
research design and data collection strategies. In
particular, I decided to focus on consultants in the New
York office, who seemed to form their own community
of practice.

In the next stage, I focused on interviewing a
majority of consultants at each level of tenure in the New
York office. The majority of these interviews were
conducted over the next five months. I also interviewed
a few people affiliated with training who were not
located in the New York office, but whose input was
important for accessing certain information.

I conducted the majority of formal interviews in a
face-to-face format in a closed office at Arris’s New
York offices. I personally arranged all interviews, conducted
them and transcribed them. Due to the nature of
consulting, I interviewed consulting staff participants
when they were available, rather than when my schedule
called for it. This choice impacted the design of the
research. I conducted 49 formal interviews, as indicated
in Table 1. I interviewed a majority of consultants in
each job position in the NY office, with the exception of
consulting partners.

| Table 1. Formal interviews conducted at Arris |
| Position | Number of People Interviewed |
| New Analysts | 10 (12) |
| Second-year Analysts | 10 (16) |
| Seasoned Analysts | 6 (7) |
| New Associates | 5 (7) |
| Other Associates | 5 (10) |
| Line Partners | 3 (14) |
| Total NY Consulting | 39 (66) |
| IS Staff | 3 |
| Other Staff | 3 |
| Staff Partners | 4 |
| Total Staff | 10 |
| Total Number of People Interviewed In-Depth | 49 |

Note: numbers in parentheses represent estimate of number of people in the position at the NY office. During my stay at Arris, people left the firm, transferred to or from another office or were promoted to a different position.

Although I was working within a broad framework, I
wanted to capture participants’ view of their world.
Therefore I used a semi-structured protocol format, and I
used ‘conversational partners’ techniques [13]. In
conducting interviews, my main goal was to encourage
participants to talk freely about their experiences, views
and perceptions of their work at Arris. I used several
approaches to avoid biasing participants in their answers.
First, I promised confidentiality and anonymity.
Second, I tape-recorded interviews and promised
participants written transcripts of the interview, which
would have the option to approve and edit. Third, I
asked questions that were intentionally open-ended. In
this way participants discussed subjects which were
important to them (within the broad framework) and
defined and interpreted terms and concepts in their way.

A typical interview began with a short description of
my reason for being at Arris and explanation of
confidentiality issues, including asking permission to
tape-record the interview. Then I confirmed demographic
details about the participant, including tenure with the
firm, position, age, nationality, educational background,
and prior work experience. I specifically probed into
participants’ prior experience with information
technology. Following this introductory phase of the
interview, I asked participants about the client projects
they had worked on in their tenure with Arris, their roles
in those projects, and if and how they used any
information technology in those roles. (Occasionally
they also worked on internal projects, those which were
not billed to a client, about which they also spoke.) I
also asked them about the training they had received at
Arris. This phase of the research was highly open-ended and often highly-revealing as well.

In the final phase of the interview I asked pre-established questions which I asked of all participants in order to allow comparison across participants. Frequently, the participant had already addressed the issues covered by the pre-established questions, so this phase of the interview gave participants the chance to elaborate or summarize prior thoughts and experiences. Interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes.

3.3. Keeping Field Notebook

During my time at Arris, I kept a field notebook. Given that the main source of data for my research were formal interviews and observations at training sessions, my field notebook served to assist me in keeping track of scheduling interviews and handing out completed transcripts, as well as recording observations at training sessions. I also used my field notebook for recording thoughts about how interviews proceeded, information found on-line (since I was prohibited from printing out documents), and other events which occurred at Arris.

3.4. Documents Collected

Table 2 lists the major documents I collected, their name and a brief description of them.

3.5. Official Participant Observations

Because I was not able to participate in actual project work, the major observations I made occurred at training sessions and at Friday meetings. Because I arrived on site in October, I did not attend the ‘Tools of the Trade/Orientation’ Training given in September for junior-level new hires. However, I did collect the training manuals and I questioned research participants about this training during interviews. I did attend the Project Simulation Training as a participant. I also attended all three Informal Training Workshops given during the period I was at Arris. Two of these were given by a junior partner (one on the topic of valuation models, the other on the topic of writing slides for presentations), and one (on the topic of data analysis using Excel and Access) was given by a seasoned analyst. Finally, I attended all the IS Training given in the NY office by the IS trainer. Note that only one consultant attended one IS training session. These sessions were also open to administrative and support staff, so were attended by these staff members. Some of these sessions had no attendees. Table 3 summarizes the training sessions offered at Arris while I was there.

In addition to attending training sessions, I attended Friday sessions whenever possible. Friday sessions often had a business component and a social component. Although my observations during the business component were official, once the social hour started, I considered my observations to be somewhat unofficial.

3.6. Unofficial Participant Observations

In such a research project it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate one’s role as a researcher from her role as interested human being. To gain acceptance and introduce myself to the organization early in my research, I attended a social event organized by the firm, the Pub Crawl. (Pub Crawl was an evening of bar-hopping on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.) Sometimes I intentionally limited my interaction with people so as not to be faced with the difficult predicament of what to include as a research observation and what to exclude as strictly personal. Nonetheless, my interaction with research participants extended to short conversations in the elevator, lunchroom, hallways, or restrooms, as well as overheard conversations in those same areas. Some of those conversations occurred outside the office where I resided, and on more than one occasion, I was required to interrupt someone in her work to set an interview or ask about the status of the transcript (thus, providing an opportunity for observation). I witnessed parts of an ‘intense’ client project (too intense for me to study, according to a partner) outside my office during the early weeks of my research.

3.7. Interaction with the IT of Consultants

I interacted with a variety of the IT consultants used. Because I was equipped with a laptop computer with a typical configuration provided to consultants, I had access to much of the same IT as consultants. For example, I used some of the templates provided in PowerPoint to produce pages with a specific type of content to portray a particular type of analysis, notably the Mekko chart. I also examined in some detail a model, called Proprietary Strategy Model which consultants customized for particular clients. This model was programmed with Visual Basic for Applications in Excel. I also used the e-mail system of Arris and interacted with the firm’s intranet and knowledge management system, although my access was somewhat restricted for the latter two systems.

4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were an important factor in conducting the field study of this research and impacted the data that was collected. Working with the categories discussed in [14]: codes and consent; deception; privacy, harm, identification and confidentiality; and
### Table 2. Documents collected at Arris

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Document(s)</th>
<th>Description of Document</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Face Book</td>
<td>provides a brief biography of each person in the NY office, with the following information: portrait photograph, title, hire date, universities attended, name of spouse and children (if applicable), home address and telephone number</td>
<td>Sr. Staff Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidential Client Proposal</td>
<td>a confidential, 20-page document prepared for a prospective client, in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, outlining the products, services and competencies of Arris</td>
<td>Staff Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools of the Trade and Orientation</td>
<td>two three-inch thick binders provided to new hires during initial two-week training</td>
<td>Consultant (European version from Director of Training)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Training Binders                       | (1) a three-inch thick binder providing:  
   (a) schedule of week-long training events  
   (b) 'face book' of training participants  
   (c) instruction in and guidance for the analysis, presentation and execution of a mock client project  
   (2) supporting documents include data for the client project                                                                                           | My participation in training                |
| Project Simulation Training Binder and other documents | e.g., "Getting the Most Out of Access and Excel: Becoming 10x More Productive," a 77-page PowerPoint document with many pages of screen shots; prepared by member of CCS other than person delivering training | My attendance at workshop                   |
| Handouts from Informal CCS Training    | short documents, ranging from 3 to 20 pages each, to supplement trainer's instruction, prepared by IS trainers.                                                                                                          | My attendance at workshop                   |
| Handouts from IS Training Workshops    | "Arris Computer Environment -Win 95, Student Manual," a 60-page document covering logging into and using the network, file server contents, intranet contents, printing, security, support, troubleshooting, remote access phone numbers; other manuals on individual topics such as Word, Excel, Access, PowerPoint, Project, Outlook, Windows Operating System, these are generally generic materials prepared by an outside firm specializing in training in information technology. For example, the titles for Excel and Access are: Excel 97 Tips and Keyboard Shortcuts, 20 pages; Excel 97: Advanced (Windows 95) Student Manual, 1/2 inch thick; Excel 97: Worksheets (Windows 95) Student Manual, 1/4 inch thick; Excel 97: Charting and Organizing Data (Windows 95) Student Manual, 1/2 inch thick; Access 97 Tips and Keyboard Shortcuts, 16 pages; Access 97: Level 1 (Windows 95) Student Manual, 1/2 inch thick; Access 97: Level 2 (Windows 95) Student Manual, 1/2 inch thick; Access 97: Advanced (Windows 95), 1/2 inch thick | IS Trainer                                 |
| IS Training Manuals                    | e.g. "Conjoint Analysis for New Product Design and Segmentation," a 52-page PowerPoint document                                                                                                                           | Consultants, downloaded from server         |
| Informal Training Documents            | e.g., human resources memos, Arris newsletters, invitations to Arris social events, Arris in the news, staffing survey, "Changing Your Primary Network Logon," status of recruiting efforts, etc.                                                                 | Inter-office mail at Arris, handouts at meetings, e-mail |
Table 3: Training for consultants at New York office of Arris (Sept 1998 - May 1999)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date and Duration</th>
<th>Name of Training (unless indicated, attendance optional)</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Researcher Attended?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 1998 2 weeks</td>
<td>Orientation and Tools of the Trade Mandatory</td>
<td>2 weeks for new analysts and associates in the New York office</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dec. 4, 1998 1-2 hours</td>
<td>Informal Training Workshop on Valuation Models</td>
<td>taught by jr. partner, attended by about 15 consultants, who drifted away until only about 3 were left at the end of the hour and a half; workshop held in a conference room, very informal, no technology; when consultants went to get their calculators, they did not return</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1999 one week</td>
<td>Project Simulation Training Mandatory</td>
<td>1 week off-site for new analysts and associates, all offices worldwide</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 24, 1999 1-2 hours</td>
<td>IT Training (Access)</td>
<td>given by IS Dept. trainer, only one consultant attended (George, one of experts)</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 24, 1999 1-2 hours</td>
<td>IT Training (Excel)</td>
<td>given by IS Dept. trainer, no consultants attended</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 24, 1999 1-2 hours</td>
<td>IT Training (Outlook)</td>
<td>given by IS Dept. trainer, no consultants attended</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2, 1999 1-2 hours</td>
<td>Informal Training Workshop on Advanced Excel</td>
<td>taught by consultant four new consultants plus one second-year consultant attended, one left after 15 min., one left after 30 min. content, differences between Excel and Access and how to use them together. Materials developed by someone other than consultant who delivered course</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 14, 1999 1-2 hours</td>
<td>IT Training Access '97 Using Queries</td>
<td>taught by IS Dept. trainer, no consultants attended, although two signed up; attended by office support staff</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 14, 1999 1-2 hours</td>
<td>IT Training Access '97 Forms and Reports</td>
<td>taught by IS Dept. trainer; no consultants attended, although two signed up; attended by office support staff</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 6, 1999 1-2 hours</td>
<td>IT Training (Outlook, Scheduling Meetings)</td>
<td>taught by IS Dept. trainer, no consultants attended</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 21, 1999 1-2 hours, lunch time</td>
<td>Informal Training Workshop: Slide Writing for Presentations</td>
<td>given by jr. partner, attended by 17 consultants (2 left early) PIZZA</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
trust and betrayal, I describe the ethical considerations I faced in my research and how I dealt with them.

4.1. Consent

“Informed consent” is the process by which the “subjects” of the research (the research participants) are informed that they are the subjects of the research and told the topic of the research. This process is often handled through a written statement which the research participant signs. In my research, such a form was deemed inappropriate. Instead, I presented myself and the general topic of my research to prospective interviewees. Then, participating in interviews was optional for all research participants. I also explained the research again in interviews and asked participants for permission to tape record the interview. Thus, by agreeing to participate in an interview, and agreeing to have the interview tape-recorded, research participants gave their consent. They had another opportunity to back out of the research during the review of the interview transcript, by either modifying the transcript or asking that it not be used as part of the data of the research. Only one participant did not have the opportunity to review the transcript since he left Arris before the transcript was available. Although some people chose not to participate in an interview (for whatever reason), no one backed out of the research once the interview was given.

The issue of informed consent was slightly more problematic in observational and social situations, but I nearly always explained my role to new people I met in these situations who did not have the opportunity to attend my presentation or participate in a formal interview with me.

4.2. Deception

Deception was not an issue in my research. I entered the research site openly as a doctoral candidate working on dissertation research. Although I declined to share my pre-existing framework with my research participants, I did describe the general area of study as that of understanding how they were using information technology in their work. Occasionally a research participant suggested that the “real” reason for my being at the site was other than what I had revealed, but I quickly assuaged any such concerns.

4.3. Privacy, Harm, Identification and Confidentiality

Privacy, harm, identification and confidentiality all refer to the safeguards that should be taken to secure the privacy and identities of the research participants. I did take many of the traditional safeguards, but not all. Further, I was required by the confidentiality agreement I signed to maintain the confidentiality of the company where I conducted the field study. I took some special safeguards emanating from doing research in the Information Age. Many of these safeguards slowed the research process, and occasionally I deemed the practicality of getting the research done more important than following the safeguards to the tee.

I protected the privacy of the individuals by conducting interviews in a private, closed office, by transcribing interviews away from research participants and colleagues, by referring to individuals by their first name and last initial only on all interview transcripts, and by further disguising their identities in any published works. Electronic versions of transcripts were kept either on a personal computer locked in a cupboard at Arris (and individual electronic files were locked by using features of the software) or on my own personal computer which was always under my own control. I personally delivered each type-written transcript to the participant or to his inter-office mailbox at Arris in a sealed envelope.

I maintained the confidentiality of Arris by adopting the pseudonym, by keeping all company documents at home rather than at my open workspace at my university, by using a cellular telephone when making calls from Arris to anyone outside Arris, and by using my e-mail account at Arris only for Arris correspondence, (sending university or personal e-mail correspondence from my university account). (Modern technologies such as ‘caller ID’ on telephone systems allow callees to identify the number of the person calling them.)

As in the consent issue above, observational and social situations posed difficulties in terms of protecting the privacy and confidentiality of participants. I intentionally chose to limit my interaction with research participants in some situations so that I would not face the possibility of breaching their privacy.

4.4. Trust and Betrayal

In order to conduct this type of research, gaining trust of the research participants is paramount. Perhaps the deepest form of trust is to become an insider. The paradox is that becoming an insider but also fulfilling the role of researcher requires the researcher/insider to leave the site at some stage. This abandonment can lead to a sense of betrayal among research participants.

In this study, I did not become a total insider, but I did gain the trust of most of my research participants. They agreed to meet with me, and to discuss the topics at hand. These people were too busy to meet simply to be polite. They often shared their feelings with me, expressing various emotions related to their experiences at Arris, and sometimes they explicitly stated that what they were about to tell me was confidential. I was told early on that I would have to give something to my research
participants if I wanted to have their cooperation (i.e., trust). I had only three things to give them: some personal history and insights into myself, thoughts about topics unrelated to my research, and the promise to share my research with them at its conclusion. I was able to give the first two, and still hope to share my research with them. However, as time has passed, and people have left Arris, it has been difficult to share my research with them.

5. Validity Considerations

During data collection I guarded against bias in several ways. First, I sought multiple perspectives from participants with different backgrounds, levels of experience, and job content (principle of multiple interpretations [1]). Second, by collecting data through multiple methods -- interviews, observations and firm documents, I validated many aspects of the data through triangulation [15] and demonstrated ‘sensitivity to possible biases and systematic distortions in the narratives collected from the participants’ (the principle of suspicion [1]). For example, participants constantly praised the firm for the many training opportunities it offered, but when I probed, both in interviews and by attending offered training sessions, I found that consultants rarely took advantage of the training. Third, I engaged regularly in the comparison of findings with theoretical preconceptions (dialogical reasoning, [1]), and documented the comparisons with theoretical memos. For example, the theoretical framework described learning as occurring within a community of practice with a reproduction cycle of six or seven years, at a minimum. In my research I found that consultants actually participated in several communities of practice and that the reproduction cycle for their main community was very short, about one and a half or two years.

6. Conclusion: Lessons Learned

What lessons related to conducting an interpretive case study have I learned from my experience?

1. Becoming an insider is uncomfortable and difficult. Decide what your role in the research will be. My research has different flavor than if I had been a member of a project team at Arris, or if I had acted as a consultant to them.

2. Collecting “data” from many sources allows triangulation and adherence to Klein and Myers' principle of suspicion. I collected data from interviews, documents, observation, etc. This allowed me to identify inconsistencies and arrive at deeper insights.

3. Limit bias by making multiple entry points into the firm. At Arris, I penetrated the firm from the top (HR Director) and from the bottom (junior consultant). It is possible that my dual entry into the firm allowed me to continue to collect data at the firm after the HR Director's departure.

4. This kind of research is intense and makes enormous demands on the researcher. Navigating my way through an unknown organization, meeting new people every day, convincing those people to give me an hour of their time when they already worked sixty or more hours per week, and conducting personal one-on-one interviews was hard work. Likewise, the subject matter, strategic management consulting, was not trivial. Researchers who have done this type of research will appreciate the issues one faces and will likely provide helpful advice. Choose sympathetic advisors or co-authors who have done this kind of research.

5. You the researcher do not always control the timing of your data collection. At Arris, I would have preferred to collect and analyze the training documents prior to interviews, and it would have been preferable to attend the initial two week orientation. However, I found reasonable solutions to these constraints.

6. Transcribing interviews drains your time and energy. I transcribed interviews myself, which consumed much of my time. Find someone else to transcribe interviews so that you, the researcher, can focus on developing insights, writing your insights and feeding them back to research participants or refining them in future interviews. Caveat: the transcriber must understand foreign accents, business terminology and names, and, in this case, consulting lingo. The transcriber must also maintain strict confidentiality standards.

7. At some stage you have to stop data collection in the field and publish what you have found, even when your experience did not always proceed as planned or "according to the book."

As a researcher in the field, you will constantly be called upon to make trade-offs in such an environment, and you cannot foresee what will happen, what information or people will be available to you, or when. You have to remain flexible and to do the best you can under the circumstances. Klein and Myers' guidelines are highly valuable because they allow the researcher to maintain this flexibility without losing sight of the overall research goal.

I have presented my experience of conducting an interpretive case study, focusing on various aspects specific to this type of field research. In particular, I addressed issues of research design, collection and interpretation of data, ethical considerations, and validity considerations. My intent is to make other researchers aware of some of the issues they may face when conducting this type of research, and to share my resolutions of these issues as I navigated the tumultuous waters of a dynamic research site, Arris Management Consulting.
9. References


