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Challenges in participant recruitment in the creation of a novel corpus of video-recorded
online business meetings

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(Developmental Paper)**

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Summary:

Videoconferencing technologies are widely used within organisations, presenting novel work contexts which are ripe for investigation as part of the ‘visual turn’ within organisational ethnomethodological-informed studies. A project has been undertaken to create a corpus of video-recorded online business meetings. This developmental paper reflects upon the process of participant recruitment in the creation of this new corpus. A comparison is made between the use of email and LinkedIn as means of extending research invitations, finding that although LinkedIn provided double the response rate compared to email, none of the organisations invited via LinkedIn went on to contribute data. A refusal rate of 99.7% was experienced, which is higher than CANBEC (95% refusal rate), a comparable project which only sought to collect audio recordings. This developmental paper concludes by making recommendations to researchers interested in collecting video data from within organisational contexts, including considering alternative sources such as pre-existing corpora.

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Introduction, Background, & Context:

The growth in qualitative methods over the past few decades has been significant for organisational studies, with focus groups and interviews becoming commonplace (Reissner, and Whittle, 2022; Rapley, 2018, p. ix). However, within the past few years, there has been a growing interest in what has been described as a ‘visual turn’ within organisational studies, often referring to the ethnographic study of visual elements such as graphics, drawings, and signs, but what is of particular interest to this developmental paper is the use of video as a method of data collection within organisational research (Hassard, et al., 2018; Rapley, 2018, p. ix; Greatbatch, and Clark, 2018, p. 19).

The collection of video data has been common within ethnomethodological-informed studies of naturally occurring social interactions, but has only more recently begun to rise in prominence within organisational studies (Hassard, et al., 2018; Greatbatch, and Clark, 2018, p. 19; Atkinson, Heritage, & Oatley, 1984, p. 413). Coinciding with a rise in the appreciation of the value of video-based research and the increasing availability of video-recording technologies being utilised within social research (Mondada, 2019; Rapley, 2018, p. 43; Greatbatch, and Clark, 2018, p. 19), has been the adoption of videoconferencing technologies (such as MS Teams and Zoom) by organisations, a trend which was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and necessity for employees to be able to work remotely (Papadopoulos, Baltas, and Balta, 2020; Doyle, and Conboy, 2020). This, I argue, presents novel and interesting contexts of work to be studied, with the ease of participation in such research almost unmatched due to the ability of participants to record their own meetings and share the recordings with researchers. By asking participants to utilise their webcams and accompanying microphones, this, it can be suggested, minimises the intrusiveness caused by separate recording devices such as video cameras or dictaphones (Rapley, 2018, p. 43).

As part of a PhD research project, which has received the required and appropriate ethical approval, and a project which has received grant funding, a corpus of video-recorded business meetings, totalling in excess of 27 hours from 4 teams across 2 participating organisations, has been collected and is currently undergoing anonymisation and transcription.

Previous corpora relating to business meetings that have been collected, such as the Cambridge and Nottingham Business English Corpus (CANBEC), consist simply of transcribed talk, with no access to the audio recordings from which the corpus was created (Handford, 2010, pp. 1-2). In the creation of CANBEC, albeit more than two decades ago, Handford (2010) notes that he chose to not include video as part of his data due to the risk of increasing an already high refusal rate of 95%, suggesting this would have been significantly higher if potential participants had been asked to allow video cameras into their meetings, apposed to merely audio recorders (Handford, 2010, p. 5).

The primary focus of this developmental paper is the process of participant recruitment in the creation of a corpus of video-recorded online business meetings, with the aim of making this corpus, once anonymised, available to other researchers. Although not the focus of this paper, it is noted the study from which this corpus originates adopted an ethnomethodological research design outlined by Greatbatch, & Clark (2018, p. 39) in which the data collection comes before the formulation of research questions. The primary interest of this study was to explore disruption caused by technology within online business meetings. Hence, despite the warnings of Handford (2010, p. 5), video-recorded online business meetings were the specific data that was of interest, with video recordings allowing, for instance, detailed multimodal analysis to be undertaken (Mondada, 2019; 2018; Rapley, 2018, pp. 42-43). This paper aims to present

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reflections and provide a basis for further discussions that researchers interested in the visual turn within organisational studies can use to inform the design of future video-based research projects.

The Process of Participant Recruitment in The Creation of The Corpus

In the creation of the corpus, a list of 490 organisations that, based on publicly available information, were deemed suitable for this study (being UK-based, having English as business lingua franca, and appearing likely to utilise some form of videoconferencing for internal meetings) was drawn up. This list incorporated organisations across a wide range of sectors and of varying sizes. Due to the focus of the study, neither an organisation's sector nor size played a role in sampling efforts. A small number of organisations from personal and professional networks were included. Where possible, individuals within each organisation were identified and their organisational email addresses were used to extend the invitation to participate, otherwise, generic email addresses, such as info@[organisation's domain], were used.

Personalised invitations were created for each organisation, with these then sent via email. Although there is little research on the effectiveness of personalised invitations on participation in academic research, Thiblin, et al. (2022) found that there were no statistically significant differences between personalised and non-personalised invitations. However, no evidence suggests that personalised invitations would harm participant recruitment. Therefore, it was decided to use personalised invitations for one particular reason: an attempt to circumvent spam filters (Ahmed, et al., 2022). Invitations becoming lost due to spam filters was deemed to be a risk to the recruitment process, preventing potential participants from having the opportunity to consider the invitation. Additionally, email invitations were sent out in smaller batches, both to ensure managing any responses was practical and in a further effort to prevent the invitations from being flagged by spam filters (Ahmed, et al., 2022). However, the extent to which these measures were effective is unknown – the measurement of this was beyond the scope of this research project.

Any organisation responding to their invitation to express an interest in participating were offered a meeting with the research team; during which they learnt more about the research project, what participating entailed, and could ask questions. After the meeting, further emails were exchanged as necessary to obtain signed consent forms, establish a timescale for recording meetings, and to make any other arrangements regarding data collection.

As shown in Table 1, of the 490 organisations contacted via email, only 2 ultimately actively participated in the creation of this corpus. This gives a participation rate of 0.4% from this first round of participant recruitment. A third organisation had consented to participate, however, they did not contribute any data to this project.

A second round of participant recruitment was undertaken using LinkedIn as a means of extending invitations. A further list of 181 individuals who were employed at identified organisations was drawn up, careful to exclude any organisation that had previously stated they did not want to participate. This shift towards LinkedIn was made after discussions within the research team, informal feedback from industry professionals, and informal discussions with colleagues. This led to the belief that individuals may be more receptive to the invitations if they can instantly verify the invitation is being extended by a genuine researcher from an academic institution, which can be achieved through the means of a pre-existing personal

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LinkedIn profile. The invitations were slightly adapted to better suit the platform of LinkedIn, primarily addressing individuals rather than organisations.

As can be seen in Table 1, of the 181 people invited via LinkedIn, none went on to participate. In total, 671 organisations were invited to participate with only 2 ultimately contributing data, resulting in a 0.3% participation rate (99.7% refusal rate).

Participant Recruitment Stage	Email		LinkedIn		Total	
	Total	Rate	Total	Rate	Total	Rate
Invitations sent	490	N/A	181	N/A	671	N/A
Responses to invitations (including automated responses)	95	19.4%	16	8.8%	111	16.5%
Responses to invitations (excluding automated responses)	21	4.3%	16	8.8%	37	5.5%
Expressions of interest in response to invitations	9	1.8%	5	2.8%	14	2.1%
Meetings with interested organisations	7	1.4%	0	0.0%	7	1.0%
Consent forms signed	3	0.6%	0	0.0%	3	0.4%
Organisations that actively participated	2	0.4%	0	0.0%	2	0.3%

Table 1: Breakdown of response/participation rates as percentages of the number of invitations sent

Reflections on The Participant Recruitment Process:

If we now compare the participant recruitment to that of Handford (2010, p. 5), we can see that his 95% refusal rate appears favourable compared to the 99.7% refusal rate experienced in this study. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer any form of detailed quantitative analysis at this point, I am able to offer some reflections and brief points of discussion.

Firstly, it is observed that once automated email responses are discounted, invitations sent via LinkedIn were approximately twice as likely to receive responses from potential participants when compared to emailed invitations (4.3% via email compared to 8.8% via LinkedIn). This is thought to be connected to a couple of factors, including the more personal nature of LinkedIn direct messages compared to email, giving the impression that individuals, rather than representatives of organisations, are personally communicating. Additionally, although no data were collected concerning the click-through rate, the pre-existing personal LinkedIn profile associated with the researcher grants an easy means through which potential participants could quickly verify the legitimacy of the researcher and thus, the invitation. However, the response rate may have been impacted by the prevalence of ‘phishing’ attacks via both email and social media platforms, including LinkedIn (Bossetta, 2018), which may have caused individuals to be suspicious of the unsolicited invitation – a concern that was briefly mentioned by a participating organisation.

Secondly, in email and message exchanges, as well as during the meetings to discuss participation, with organisations who had expressed interest, it was observed that one of the

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major concerns, and ultimate reasons for organisations choosing not to participate, was a general unease about allowing any kind of audio or video recording of their internal meetings. This was at least partially related to a desire by some organisations to preserve client confidentiality, whether this was a perceived or a real threat to them as an organisation. Although strong reassurances regarding anonymity and confidentiality were given, many found the idea of allowing an external researcher into their internal meetings – albeit through the lens of their own webcams – was a step too far, and were not prepared to consider donating video recordings of their meetings. This highlights the collaborative and reflexive nature of ethnomethodological-informed visual research, where the researcher must constantly negotiate access through gatekeepers and individual participants (Banks, 2001, p. 112; Warren, 2002; Rose, 2007, pp. 239-240).

Finally, although all of our points of discussion presented in the previous paragraphs require further investigation, I am able to offer support to Handford's (2010, p. 5) assumption that seeking to collect video recordings of business meetings would result in an increased refusal rate. This is a challenge to any researcher seeking to collect video data from within organisational settings, and a challenge for which they should be prepared. Researchers should consider alternative means of accessing video data from within organisational settings, such as utilising recordings already publicly accessible via the internet (Greatbatch, and Clark, 2018, p. 7), to which this project hopes to add by making the anonymised corpus available to other researchers.

The Developmental Nature of This Paper:

In this developmental paper, I have offered reflections which I hope will help spark further discussions among researchers and practitioners. For presentation at BAM 2023, additional consideration will be paid to how access was negotiated with organisations who had expressed interest in participating, as well as the data anonymisation process undertaken.

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