

Comparing Traditional Focus Groups with a Group Support Systems (GSS) Approach for Use in SME Research

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This study examined the use of Group Support Systems (GSS) technology as a tool for soliciting perceptions, or ideas, from a target audience. We compared this approach to a more traditional focus group methodology, and concluded that GSS technology has a number of advantages. First, the relative anonymity of responses encouraged participation from the more timid group members, ensuring vocal individuals did not dominate. Second, the GSS technology made the findings available to group members immediately, so that clarification, correction and some quantitative analysis of responses could take place during the session. Third, the GSS approach allowed ideas to be separated from the person, ensuring that any subsequent discussion was depersonalized. Fourth, the results were available immediately after the session. Finally, the GSS technology was more cost effective because the additional cost of using this approach was more than offset by the savings from not having to transcribe participants' responses.

KEYWORDS: focus groups; Group Support Systems; SMEs

Introduction

The use of focus groups is a well established and widely used qualitative tool in commercial marketing research (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000; Calder, 1977). Given that this technique can be used in any situation where people's perceptions, or views, are of interest, their limited use 'as a research tool by academics studying entrepreneurs and small businesses is perhaps surprising' (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000: 48). One of the primary benefits attributed to focus groups (over other qualitative methods such as personal interviews) is the additional insight that can be gained from the interaction of a cohort group (e.g. small business owners). However, there are a number of potential difficulties with the use of this technique. In particular, it is possible for the discussion to be dominated by a few assertive individuals and this may result in a restricted set of views, or ideas, being captured. In addition, transcribing the views that are presented (normally from audiotapes) can be difficult and time consuming. To overcome

some of these difficulties, a number of recent studies have pointed to the potential benefits of using computer technology in such exploratory qualitative research (Soutar et al., 1996). Making use of computer technology within focus group sessions is commonly referred to as using a group support systems (GSS) approach. Since both the traditional focus group approach and the GSS approach are likely to be of interest to small business researchers, this article describes, discusses and evaluates each of these approaches within the context of exploring the motivations (goals) of small and medium enterprise (SME) owner-operators.

The next section of the article provides a brief overview of the traditional focus group approach followed by a description of the relatively new GSS approach. We then provide details of a study in which we used the two approaches and our findings with respect to their relative merits. We conclude with some recommendations for SME researchers contemplating the use of focus groups in exploratory qualitative research.

Traditional Focus Groups

Focus groups are a popular way to elicit views and perceptions from a potentially diverse group of individuals. There is no 'ideal size' for a focus group, but it is generally accepted that 8 to 12 is an effective number (Fern, 1982). Although group members do not normally meet before a session, they typically are selected because they have an interest in the subject being investigated. Normally several focus groups are held to ensure that a broad cross-section of views and opinions are canvassed on the topic of interest. Focus groups are considered to be a useful tool to generate research hypotheses, test research methods and interpret research findings (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000).

Focus group sessions can be structured,¹ or unstructured, depending on the purpose of the research. The group discussion is led, and controlled, by a facilitator whose role it is to: stimulate a free-flowing discussion; help members share their experiences; elicit the views of all participants; keep group members on track; and capture responses. Within the focus group, the main idea is to 'nurture perceptions and to help members comment, explain, share experiences and form attitudes together' (Soutar et al., 1996: 35). Responses are often recorded on audiotape.

The main advantage of the focus group approach is that a good facilitator can provoke a free-flowing discussion. Consequently, the resulting group interaction 'can generate more than the sum of individual inputs' (Lederman, 1990: 119). It has also been suggested that participants may feel more comfortable about sharing their feelings and experiences within a group of peers than in a one-on-one interview with a researcher (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000).

However, focus groups have a number of potential disadvantages. First, the group might too quickly agree to the first idea presented in the discussion ('yea saying'). Second, the group's views might be unduly influenced by pressures to conform, as individuals could be hesitant to express views different to those normally expected (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000). Third, it is possible for a focus group session to be dominated by a few assertive individuals, preventing the

expression of potentially useful ideas through either a reluctance on the part of some participants to speak out, or a lack of opportunity. Finally, there can be a number of potential problems associated with capturing all responses from individual group members. For example, in preparing transcripts from audiotapes, it is not always possible to hear all the comments, particularly if some group members are quietly spoken or if a number of participants are making points simultaneously. Further, the transcription process and the subsequent analysis of the transcripts can be time consuming and can significantly delay a research project.

The GSS Approach

It is argued that using a GSS approach can overcome (or at least minimize) many of the above-mentioned problems, because responses to questions are captured electronically prior to any discussion taking place.

In a typical GSS session up to 10 people, each with a computer, are arranged around a table as depicted in Figure 1.² The computers are linked to a central 'chauffeur's' computer workstation. The chauffeur drives the computer technology that is used to capture, clarify and print copies of responses from group members. The chauffeur's screen can be made visible to group members through a data show and an overhead projector.

Participants type their responses to a series of questions posed by the

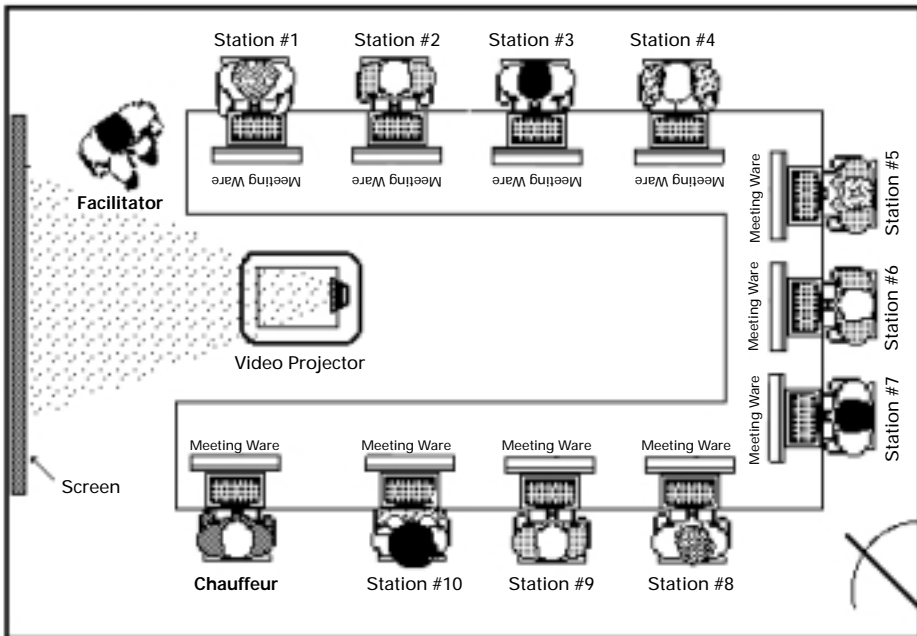


Figure 1. A Typical GSS Meeting Room
Source: Based on Lewis (1987) – GSS Meeting Works™

facilitator. The system allows all group members to 'talk' at once, creating what Sweeney et al. (1997: 400) have termed a 'parallel interviewing process'. The ideas that group members generate in a GSS session are anonymous and can only be connected to a particular group member if that person makes their views known in the discussion that normally takes place after participants have entered their responses to a question. This process helps to ensure that all ideas are recorded, even where participants may have reason to believe that the majority of group members do not share their beliefs. It has been suggested that this type of anonymity is one of the important advantages of the GSS technology, as it ensures that good ideas 'are allowed to dominate rather than assertive individuals' (Sweeney et al., 1997: 400).

There are a number of other advantages associated with using GSS technology. It allows each group member to input 'top of mind' information early in the process, and before any individual has had an opportunity to dominate the discussion. This ensures that all participants have an equal opportunity to have their ideas recorded and considered by the group. As a result, prior studies have suggested that using a GSS approach generally results in more ideas being captured than with a traditional focus group approach. For example, Sweeney et al. (1997: 406) found that 'GSS groups produced a third more ideas' compared to traditional focus groups. The highly structured nature of GSS groups also seems to generate more 'usable' information because unimportant sidetracks are more easily avoided and it is easier to keep participants focused on the task (Sweeney et al., 1997).³ Also, when using GSS technology, the 'facilitator is free to give full attention to group dynamics without having to control a queue of speakers, write ideas or take down notes' (Soutar et al., 1996: 38) and this can significantly increase the effectiveness of the process. Another potential advantage of the GSS approach is that it allows participants to rate, or rank, the ideas generated by the group during the session. This can be useful when determining which ideas, out of a long list, should be retained for further analysis or discussion.⁴ Finally, the GSS technology permits the ideas that are generated by the group to be displayed (or printed) at important stages of the process, enabling these ideas to be used for further group stimulus and discussion, and ensuring that good ideas are not 'lost'. Figure 2 depicts the sequence of events as they might occur in a typical GSS session compared with a traditional focus group.

One possible disadvantage of the GSS approach is that it may increase the cost of conducting a focus group session as it requires sophisticated computer equipment (including computer hardware and software and data display facilities) and both a facilitator and a chauffeur. However, there may also be some cost savings as there is no need to transcribe audio or video recordings. Further, there can be a considerable time saving as the GSS output is available immediately after the session concludes, without having to wait for audiotapes to be transcribed.

Another potential disadvantage of using the GSS technology is that it may prevent a free-flowing discussion. This, in turn, may result in a less 'in-depth' understanding of the issues of interest than would otherwise have been achieved

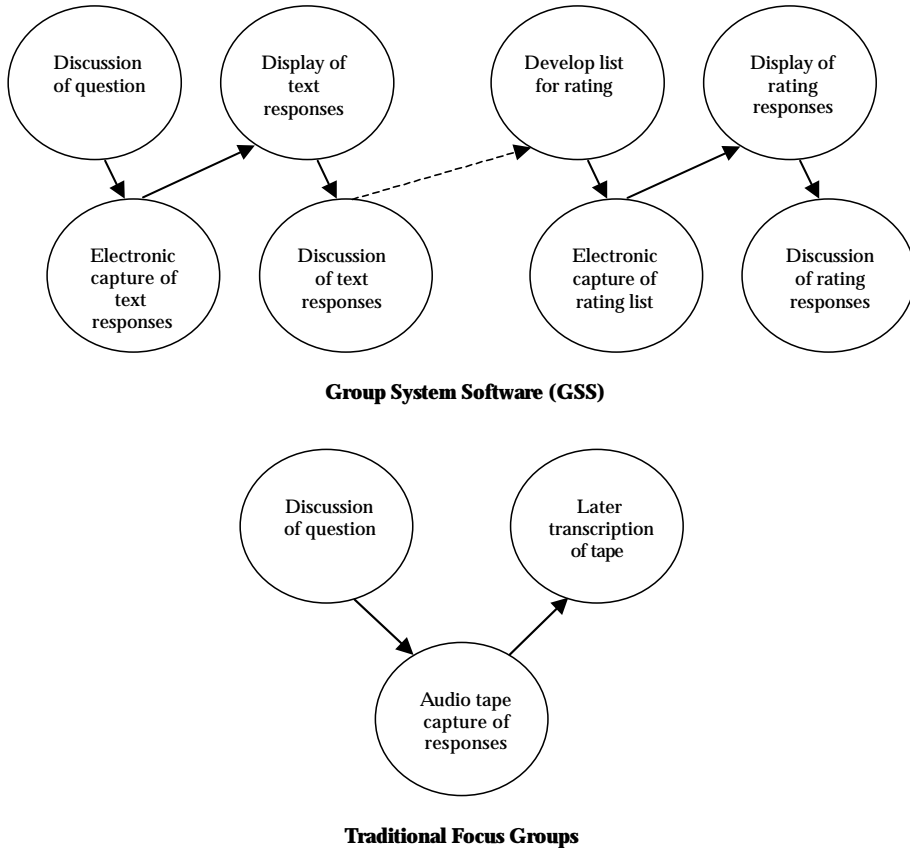


Figure 2. Sequence of Events

using a traditional focus group format (Sweeney et al., 1997). Whether or not this is a serious disadvantage will depend on the primary purpose of the session (that is, idea generation or in-depth understanding). In any event significant discussion can still take place in a GSS session after participants have entered their responses. Although the purpose of this discussion is normally to clarify or elaborate on particular ideas before moving to the next question, the researcher could capture this discussion using audio recordings, as with a traditional focus group.

It should also be noted that some participants might be reluctant to use computer technology with which they are unfamiliar. However, as the use of various forms of electronic communication becomes more widespread, this problem should become less of an issue (Soutar et al., 1996). In this study, the use of computer technology did not appear to be a problem for the participants in the GSS groups.

An Illustrative Example

Researchers have long had an interest in the factors that motivate people to start (and continue) a small business (Arlow and Ackelsberg, 1991; Blackburn and Stokes, 2000; Cromie and Hayes, 1991; Hunt and Handler, 1999; Naughton, 1987; VandenHeuvel and Wooden, 1997). However, no accepted scale has been established to measure SME owner-operator motivations (objectives),⁵ despite the many answers such a scale might help to provide. For example, if such an instrument existed, it might help to explain why businesses run by women perform relatively poorly on some quantitative financial measures, even after controlling for confounding variables such as industry and age of proprietor (Rosa et al., 1996). As a first step in the process of developing such a scale, we conducted four focus groups with small business owner-operators to help 'further our understanding of the motivations, rationales and experiences of small business owners' (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000: 44).

Two of the groups were conducted using a traditional focus group approach and the other two used GSS technology. The main aim of the sessions was to determine the objectives that owner-operators felt explained their reasons for starting and staying in business and to see whether these factors were similar to those suggested by Kuratko et al. (1997) and Woodliff et al. (1999). The use of the two approaches allowed us to examine their relative merits as tools in undertaking SME research.

A total of 16 owner-operators (including 4 female operators) attended the two traditional focus group sessions and 13 (including 7 females) attended the two GSS sessions. The same facilitator, who was experienced in running both forms of focus groups, ran all four sessions. Participants (SME owner-operators) were drawn from: a Chamber of Commerce directory, a small business incubator, and a large suburban shopping mall. A wide range of business and entrepreneurial types was chosen to maximize our chances of capturing all possible aspects to SME owner-operators' objectives. While it could be argued that such a deliberately unrepresentative sample limits the generalizability of our findings, it should be noted that this limitation applies equally to individual interview research (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000). In any event, the purpose of this study was not to draw specific conclusions but rather to confirm earlier research by Kuratko et al. (1997) and Woodliff et al. (1999), prior to developing a set of scales for use by researchers interested in the motivations of SME owner-operators.

Data was gathered by asking a series of questions that were presented in both a reflective manner (e.g. 'why do *people* enter business?') and in a more personal manner (e.g. 'why did *you* enter business?'). To check the robustness of the responses, the questions were posed for three different time frames:

1. At start-up (why did you go into business?).
2. At the present point in time (why do you stay in business?).
3. In the future (what goals do you have for the future?).

Responses were captured on audiotapes for the traditional focus groups. These were subsequently transcribed by a person who was separate from the research

team and then the transcript was analysed for content by one of the members of the researcher team. At the time of transcription, the voice of the facilitator was made known to the transcriber, but no instruction was given to separately identify the participants.⁶

Responses were captured electronically for the GSS sessions. These responses were then displayed (anonymously) for participants to discuss. For some questions (as discussed in the next section) the facilitator developed a summary table of participants' responses. Participants were then asked to rate (score) the importance of each item in the summary listing. These ratings were also captured electronically for subsequent use by the researchers.

Results

Consistent with the perceived advantages of the GSS technology described earlier, the GSS groups produced a greater breadth of information compared to the traditional focus groups. The most important aspect of this improved quality of responses came from the increased number of qualitative text responses (ideas) generated by the GSS participants, as can be seen in Table 1. There was a significant degree of 'yea saying' by participants in the traditional groups and it seems that the mindset of the group was often driven by whoever gave the initial response to the facilitator's question.⁷ For example, this effect was especially noticeable when participants were asked to identify the specific personal goals of people in small business. The first comment made in both traditional focus groups was that business and personal goals were too intertwined to discuss separately. This comment was immediately agreed to by the other group members and hence no meaningful replies were generated from this question. No such problems were encountered in the two groups using the GSS technology.

A further problem that has been identified with respect to structured traditional focus groups is their capacity to go 'off-track', or away from the pre-determined script. Our experience supports this view. Although the facilitator operated from the same script in all four focus groups, an important question was missed in one of the non-GSS groups (as noted in Table 1).⁸ This could not have occurred using the GSS technology given the 'pre-programming' of questions in their expected order.

Fortunately, we did not have any particularly dominant personalities in either of the two traditional focus groups and, therefore, we did not experience any of the potential difficulties discussed earlier that can arise when such personalities are present. However, there was an extremely dominant, and negative, participant in one of the GSS groups who tested the facilitator's patience. The way in which the GSS technology reduced this person's impact on the group's discussion (and thinking) was noticeable, and served to demonstrate a significant potential advantage of using GSS technology.

The GSS technology also made it possible for participants to be asked to rate, or rank, the importance of particular ideas (anonymously) during the session. For example, once the participants had answered the question – 'What do you enjoy

Table 1. Number of Replies Generated by Type of Focus Group

	<i>Traditional Groups</i>	<i>GSS Groups</i>
<i>At start-up</i>		
<i>Why do you think people go into business?</i>		
Replies	17	33
Replies per participant	1.06	2.54
<i>Why did you go into business for yourself?</i>		
Replies	20	44
Replies per participant	1.25	3.38
<i>At the present point in time</i>		
<i>What do you enjoy most about being in business for yourself?</i>		
Replies	13	37
Replies per participant	0.81	2.85
<i>In the future</i>		
<i>What are the specific business goals of people in small business?</i>		
Replies	This question	12
Replies per participant	was missed	0.92
	for one group	
<i>What are your goals for the business?</i>		
Replies	11	23
Replies per participant	0.69	1.77
<i>What are the specific personal goals of people in small business?</i>		
Replies	Did not	15
Replies per participant	differentiate	1.15
	from business	
	goals	
<i>What are your goals for yourself in relation to the business?</i>		
Replies	Did not	24
Replies per participant	differentiate	1.85
	from business	
	goals	

most about being in business for yourself?', the facilitator generated a listing of the qualitative responses produced by the group. Participants were then asked to allocate 10 points across the items on the list. The average score for each item is shown in Table 2. This ranking of ideas, in order of perceived importance, proved helpful in our subsequent efforts to develop a scale for the measurement of SME owner-operator objectives.

Finally, we found that the GSS technology did not increase our overall cost of obtaining focus group responses. The facilitator charged the same fee for each of the groups and the rental cost of the GSS software and hardware was less than the cost of transcribing the audiotapes, even after the extra payment for the chauffeur. Therefore, the GSS technology provided a win-win situation; it generated more responses for a lower total cost.

Table 2. Participants' Scoring of Ideas Generated By the Group

<i>What Do You Enjoy Most About Being in Business for Yourself?</i>			
<i>GSS Group 1</i>	<i>Average Score</i>	<i>GSS Group 2</i>	<i>Average Score</i>
Control of my own destiny	2.5	Making money	2.9
Happy customers	2.0	Control of my own destiny	1.7
Being my own boss	1.2	The 'challenge'	1.5
Flexibility	1.1	Achieving	1.2
The 'challenge'	1.1	Being my own boss	1.1
Achieving	0.9	Flexibility	1.0
To be a leader	0.5	Social interaction	0.5
Recognition of our achievements	0.5	Revenge	0.1
Offering employment	0.2		

Summary and Conclusions

Consistent with the results of Blackburn and Stokes (2000), we confirm that focus group studies can usefully add to our knowledge concerning the motivations (objectives) of SME owners. In this study, two approaches (a traditional focus group approach and an approach using GSS technology) were used to collect ideas about the objectives of SME owner-operators. While both approaches were useful in terms of generating ideas from our target audience, we found that using the GSS technology resulted in a number of significant benefits compared with using a more traditional approach. In particular, the anonymity of responses with the GSS approach ensured that the ideas generated (or issues raised) were depersonalized in the subsequent discussion. This anonymity also seemed to: increase the quantum of ideas generated; encourage participation from the more timid members of the group; and reduce the opportunity for forceful personalities to dominate the outcomes. The GSS technology also ensured that the discussion was kept 'on-track' and removed the opportunity for members to 'yea say', or agree with the first idea presented. Finally, when using the GSS technology, the facilitator was able to make findings available to the group members immediately so that clarification, correction and, in particular, some quantitative analysis of responses, could take place during the session.

The only significant disadvantage with the GSS approach was that the discussion was less free-flowing as participants were asked to input their ideas on each question (issue) prior to any discussion taking place. While this may pose a problem where an in-depth discussion of a particular issue is required, it was not a problem for this study because our primary interest was in generating as many ideas as possible.

We suggest, therefore, that where a breadth of ideas is required, making use of GSS technology is likely to result in a better outcome. However, if a deep understanding of clearly developed and well-specified issues is required, we believe that a relatively unstructured traditional approach is likely to be more useful.⁹ Further,

we would suggest that in some situations (for example where an in-depth understanding of a relatively unspecified issue is required) the researcher might consider using a combination of the traditional and GSS approaches.¹⁰

In conclusion, our advice to qualitative researchers of SMEs is that they should not only embrace the use of focus groups for their research, but should also seriously consider applying the GSS technology. The GSS technology not only appears to alleviate many of the potential problems that can be encountered with group dynamics, it also seems to result in a greater breadth of ideas being generated. In addition, if the present study is any indication, the additional cost of using the GSS technology is likely to be more than offset by the savings (both cost and time) associated with not having to transcribe participants' responses from audio-tapes.

Notes

1. For example, by following a script (a pre-ordered sequence of specific questions).
2. Group members require no previous keyboard or computer skills.
3. Because the GSS technology requires the use of a predetermined script. This is not to say that questions cannot be skipped or reordered using GSS technology, but rather such a choice must be deliberate rather than accidental.
4. It should be noted that self-reporting after an event may result in inaccurate weightings being assigned (Shepherd, 1999). However, this limitation applies equally to survey and other empirical research where respondents are asked to provide details on an event (topic) of interest subsequent to the occurrence of that event.
5. In the same way that accepted scales have been developed and are used in other disciplines, particularly psychology.
6. For which the staff member was extremely grateful as she had enough trouble deciphering some of the participants' accents. Her difficulties in transcription were consistent with a previously noted disadvantage of traditional focus groups.
7. Again consistent with a disadvantage of traditional focus groups noted earlier.
8. Post-session, the facilitator commented that when he realized his error he felt he could not go back to the question.
9. Through its greater capacity to allow participants to share their experiences and to let discussions 'snowball' (Blackburn and Stokes, 2000: 61).
10. This could comprise separate GSS and traditional focus groups, where the ideas are developed in the former and explored more fully in the latter. Alternatively, a hybrid approach using both methods could be adopted. Under this approach the GSS technology would be used for idea generation and capture, and audio recording would be used for capturing the deeper discussions.

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Comparaison des «Focus Groups» (groupes de discussion) traditionnels avec une démarche de Group Support System (GSS) pour utilisation dans les recherches sur les PME – Rick Newby, Geoff Soutar, John Watson

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Cette étude a examiné l'utilisation de la technologie «Group Support System» (GSS) en tant qu'outil pour solliciter des perceptions, ou des idées, d'une audience cible. Nous avons comparé cette démarche à une méthodologie plus traditionnelle utilisant des «focus groups», et avons conclu que la technologie GSS présente un certain nombre d'avantages. Premièrement, l'anonymat relatif des réponses a encouragé la participation des membres plus timides du groupe, garantissant que les individus qui se font le plus entendre ne dominant pas. Deuxièmement, la technologie GSS a immédiatement mis les conclusions à la disposition des membres du groupe de sorte que la clarification, la correction et une certaine analyse quantitative des réponses puissent avoir lieu pendant la séance. Troisièmement, le système GSS a permis de séparer les idées de la personne, garantissant la dépersonnalisation de toute discussion ultérieure. Quatrièmement, les résultats ont immédiatement été disponibles après la séance. Pour terminer, la technologie GSS était plus rentable parce que le coût supplémentaire de l'utilisation de cette démarche était plus que compensé par les économies réalisées du fait de ne pas avoir à transcrire les réponses des participants.

Mots clés: "Focus Groups"; "Group Support Systems" (GSS); PME

Los grupos de discusión tradicionales en comparación con un planteamiento del sistema de apoyo de grupo para uso en la investigación de las PYME – Rick Newby, Geoff Soutar, John Watson

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Este estudio examina el uso de la tecnología del Sistema de Apoyo de Grupo (GSS, siglas de Group Support System) como una herramienta para solicitar las percepciones, o ideas, a un grupo elegido como objetivo. Comparamos este planteamiento con la metodología más tradicional de grupo de discusión, y llegamos a la conclusión de que la tecnología de GSS ofrece una serie de ventajas. En primero lugar, el relativo anonimato de las respuestas anima a los miembros más tímidos a participar en la sesión e impide que dominen los miembros más ruidosos del grupo. En segundo lugar, la tecnología de GSS pone los resultados a disposición inmediata de los miembros del grupo, de modo que se puede llevar a cabo la aclaración y corrección de las respuestas, y un análisis cuantitativo durante la sesión. En tercer lugar, el sistema GSS permite separar las ideas de la persona, quitando así las referencias personales a cualquier discusión posterior. En cuarto lugar, los resultados están disponibles inmediatamente después de la sesión. Por último, la tecnología de GSS es más eficaz en función de los costes porque el coste adicional del planteamiento es compensado por los ahorros al no tener que transcribir las respuestas de los participantes.

Palabras claves: grupos de discusión; sistemas de apoyo de grupo; PYME

Vergleich von traditionellen Fokusgruppen mit Unterstützungssystemen bei der Zusammenarbeit in Gruppen (Group Support System, GSS) zur Anwendung bei Studien Mittelständischer Unternehmen – Rick Newby, Geoff Soutar, John Watson

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Diese Studie befasst sich mit der Prüfung der Methode der GSS (Unterstützungssystem bei der Zusammenarbeit in Gruppen) als Instrument der Wahrnehmungs- oder Ideenfindung aus Sicht der Zielgruppe. Wir haben diese Methode mit einer traditionelleren Methodenlehre der Fokusgruppenmethode verglichen und dabei festgestellt, dass die GSS-Methode etliche Vorteile aufweist. Erstens fühlten sich die eher schüchternen Gruppenmitglieder durch die relative Anonymität der Reaktionen ermutigt, da sie sich nicht durch die 'stimmgewaltigeren' Teilnehmer eingeschüchtert fühlten. Zweitens konnten durch die GSS-Methode die Ergebnisse den Gruppenmitgliedern unmittelbar mitgeteilt werden, so dass Klärung, Korrektur und ein Teil der quantitativen Analyse der Reaktionen noch während der Sitzung erfolgen konnten. Drittens konnten durch das GSS-System Ideen von den einzelnen Teilnehmern getrennt werden und somit alle nachfolgenden Diskussionen entpersönlicht werden. Viertens waren die Ergebnisse unmittelbar nach den Sitzungen verfügbar. Letztendlich erwies sich die GSS-Methode als kosteneffizienter, da die Äußerungen der Teilnehmer nicht aufgezeichnet werden mussten.

Schlagwörter: Fokusgruppen; Group Support Systems (Unterstützungssystem bei der Zusammenarbeit in Gruppen); Mittelstandsunternehmen