

Standards of Professional Competency
and
Self-Assessment Tool
for
Qualitative Research Consultants

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Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA)

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Section I: Introduction, Purposes, Benefits

Introduction

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

Since the inception of the qualitative research profession, many researchers have developed practices and approaches that they believed to represent “professional” behavior. To date, however, no concerted effort has been made to standardize these practices and approaches for the qualitative research industry worldwide. The following document attempts to do just that, so that we can move, as individuals and as a profession, to a shared and explicit definition of the meaning of “professional.”

Purposes

Among other purposes, these standards can be used to:

- **Define and codify the skills, traits and practices** that constitute the professional conduct of qualitative research consultants;
- **Provide QRCs with a framework for self-assessment**, identifying areas of accomplishment and opportunities for continued growth;
- **Create a framework for education**--developing and evaluating curricula for QRCs.

- **Assist clients** in identifying the performance they seek and evaluating the performance they receive;

Benefits

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

- **Setting expectations** by issuing an explicit statement of the nature of professionalism for our profession.
- **Improving the collective performance of QRCs**, thereby improving the image and prestige of our profession.
- **Identifying areas of growth for QRCs** through use of the self-assessment tool.
- **Creating a forum** for the discussion and inclusion of diverse perspectives on our profession while emphasizing our areas of consensus.

Overview of this Document

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

In Section III, we provide a self-assessment tool that allows each individual QRC to evaluate his or her level of competence on each

of the eleven standards. Each of these competencies may be mastered at different levels, from associate to leader/innovator. All of these levels are professional; a person may choose which level of each competency is appropriate for his or her practice at any given time. The *standards* for each level of competency are in each of the cells in the self-assessment instrument. To identify your current level on any competency, look through the standards to see where you think you best fit and note your self-perception in the column labeled “your level.” Keep in mind that scoring “higher” on the scale is not necessarily better. We did NOT design this set of standards with the assumptions that (1) more is always better or (2) it's always worth what it takes to get higher, or that (3) each competency is of equal weight. In fact, we think that all of those assumptions are false for just about everyone. Each individual has to decide where she or he wants to be at any moment in her/his career. The standards and associated instrument help us see where we are and where else we might be -- in both directions -- so we can make more informed decisions about our own professional development.

The “best” result is one that has you at the level you seek for each standard.

Lastly, in Section IV we provide a list of discussion questions and issues to help structure the feedback from you. Please remember that this document is in draft form and will be revised and improved based on feedback from you and all of our colleagues.

How You Can Help

We seek your constructively critical review and feedback on the standards and associated self-assessment tool. This is an essential step in achieving the necessary consensus and “buy-in” for this project to be successful. Please do the following:

- Carefully review the attached standards and complete the self-assessment tool.
- Discuss both with colleagues and reply to the questions we have attached either via a QRCA chapter or special interest group meeting. (Please make sure the discussion is audio recorded and forward the tape(s) to the Professionalism Committee of the QRCA in care of Bob Kahle, Kahle Research Solutions Inc., 202 W. Fifth Avenue, Royal Oak, MI 48067 (248-541-6200). If you are reviewing the documents as an individual rather than part of a group, reply via email to the Professionalism Committee of the QRCA in care of Bob Kahle at rwkahle@concentric.net.
- Give us your commitment to assist in developing meaningful standards for our profession. Once the standards are finalized, provide us your commitment to consciously promote the Standards of Professional Competency in your work and professional associations.

Our Commitment to You

As a committee, we commit to you that we will:

- Carefully and considerately review all feedback.
- Use our best judgment to integrate the feedback into a revision of the standards and the self-assessment tool.
- Provide a revision of the standards and tool to all who provided feedback.
- Cooperate and coordinate with academic institutions, training providers, other professional associations and all others who seek to advance qualitative research consulting.

- Finalize, distribute and promote the standards and self-assessment tool to QRCA members, other professional associations, and other interested parties and organizations.

Thank you in advance for your assistance and commitment to professionalism.

Section II: Standards of Professional Competency

While the eleven competencies listed below may overlap, we believe that they reflect sufficiently important differences in emphasis to merit separate categories. The order of categories implies no judgment about their relative importance. Each of these may be mastered at different levels, from novice to master.

Consulting

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

Research

3. **Conceptualization and Design:** Recasts client's stated problem into relevant research issues and designs appropriate research to collect and analyze data to address those issues.
4. **Research:** Understands and applies the social science research process, including the differences and appropriate conditions for application of qualitative and quantitative research and common specific research applications.

5. **Interviewing:** Knows and can apply interviewing principles. Knows and uses a variety of appropriate interviewing and group leadership tools to establish a sense of psychological safety and rapport with respondents. Can encourage individuals and groups to share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas openly and honestly; is able to derive understanding through visual cues and body language; can understand widely differing points of view among respondents in their own terms.
6. **Analysis:** Understands observations and analyzes them to develop client-relevant themes that are well substantiated by the observations.

Professional and Business Practices

7. **Communication:** Actively and accurately listens to all parties in the research consulting process (clients, respondents, suppliers, and others); writes insightful, clear reports; delivers effective oral presentations in a variety of formal and informal settings, whether prepared or spontaneous.
8. **Professional Practices:** Understands and acknowledges the limits of her or his knowledge and capabilities as well as the strengths and limitations of qualitative research; has read, understands and has committed to upholding the QRCA Code of Ethics.
9. **Project Management/Coordination:** Sets up, implements, and monitors complex projects, either alone or with subcontractors, in timely, cost-efficient ways that effectively meet client needs.
10. **Business Practices:** Runs an economically sustainable (for profit or non-profit) business. Targets and reaches prospective clients with appealing and beneficial offers of services; engages in good-faith negotiations with clients, associates, and suppliers

to offer and obtain services at quality levels and satisfactory prices while maintaining acceptable profit margins; develops and maintains mutually beneficial relationships with clients, associates, and suppliers; plans and implements appropriate accounting and financial processes to bill, pay, and keep track of transactions, profits and losses, and taxes; makes consulting and supplier agreements consistent with both business ethics and law; holds proprietary information in strict confidence.

11. **Commitment to the Profession:** In addition to all other qualities: mentors, teaches, and encourages junior and senior consultants; works toward moving the profession forward and elevating it in the eyes of the public; demonstrates a willingness to give back to the profession by sharing, publishing and teaching; builds and improves upon existing techniques and pioneers new techniques; maintains a fresh outlook on the industry through continued learning and a joyful, positive attitude.

Section III: The Self-Assessment Tool

| Competency Definition | Your Level | Associate | Professional | Expert | Leader/Innovator |
|---|------------|--|---|--|---|
| CONSULTING | | | | | |
| <p>1. Consulting: Focuses effectively on improving the client’s situation; creates and implements a research process to meet the client’s needs and objectives; and develops insightful, data-based recommendations that add value for the client.</p> | | <p><i>With guidance and supervision,</i> Understands client’s situation. Designs research to meet client needs. Implements research.</p> | <p><i>Independently,</i> Takes total responsibility for the client relationship, including formulation of the problems, goals, and development and execution of a strategic and tactical plan for reaching those goals. As a result of the research, spots opportunities that can be further explored.</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Focuses totally on improving the client’s situation. Identifies breakthrough opportunities and makes realistic recommendations for implementing them. Has a high level of expertise as a marketing strategist or social scientist, so he/she can make sensible, creative recommendations that incorporate the research findings, but also go way beyond them.</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Readily shares insights, perspectives and experiences with others to improve their productivity. Uses what is learned in research across many clients to contribute to business or social science knowledge and practice through writing and speaking.</p> |
| <p>2. Content: Has general knowledge of the area of consulting (e.g., business, health care, or social policy); knowledge of the disciplines relevant to that area (e.g., marketing, management, psychology, anthropology, sociology, political science, policy analysis, health care). This foundation of knowledge enables the consultant to understand quickly unfamiliar specific issues and relate them to qualitative research on which to construct valuable recommendations.</p> | | <p><i>With guidance and supervision,</i> Has basic knowledge of one or two consulting areas Has basic knowledge of one or two disciplines relevant to the those consulting areas Has some feel for the specific content areas and one or two relevant disciplines Can ask relevant questions of client and make relevant suggestions about research issues and methods</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Has substantial knowledge and great feel for multiple consulting areas and relevant disciplines Readily draws on broad prior knowledge and experience to understand client situation in most areas, including unfamiliar specific areas and situations Designs and implements relevant research and makes valuable recommendations</p> | <p><i>Independently,</i> Has substantial knowledge and acute sense for several specific consulting areas and major relevant disciplines Readily understands client situation in those areas Designs and implements relevant research and makes valuable recommendations</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Readily shares information with colleagues and newcomers.</p> |

| Competency Definition | Your Level | Associate | Professional | Expert | Leader/Innovator |
|---|------------|--|---|---|--|
| RESEARCH | | | | | |
| 3. Conceptualization and Design: Recasts client’s stated problem into relevant research issues and designs appropriate research to collect and analyze data to address those issues. | | <i>With guidance and supervision,</i> Understands client ‘s stated research problem and some underlying issues Designs research to address those issues | <i>Independently,</i> Identifies underlying business or social issues Translates these issues into research issues Translates these research issues into research objectives and questions Designs research to address these research questions | <i>In addition,</i> Suggests additional business, social, and research issues of higher priority to client Translates these issues into research questions Designs research to address these research questions | <i>In addition,</i> Shares insights with other colleagues to help them identify underlying business questions and research issues |
| 4. Research Understands and applies the social science research process, including the differences and appropriate conditions for application of qualitative and quantitative research and common specific research applications. | | <i>With guidance and supervision,</i> Understands the fundamentals of qualitative research Knows when qualitative research is and is not appropriate Conducts basic qualitative research projects | <i>Independently,</i> Knows more advanced research principles and practices Knows which practices to apply to different projects Implements more advanced research projects | <i>In addition,</i> Designs and implements research with a broad variety and combination of methods appropriate to complicated projects Makes appropriate use or interpretation of quantitative research as it relates to the qualitative project at hand | <i>In addition,</i> Creates new uses for current research methods Creates and shares new methods |

| Competency Definition | Your Level | Associate | Professional | Expert | Leader/Innovator |
|---|-------------------|--|--|--|---|
| <p>5. Interviewing Knows and can apply interviewing principles. Knows and uses a variety of appropriate interviewing and group leadership tools to establish a sense of psychological safety and rapport with respondents. Can encourage individuals and groups to speak and share their thoughts, feelings, and ideas openly and honestly, and can understand widely differing points of view among respondents in their own terms.</p> | | <p><i>With guidance and supervision,</i> Knows basic interviewing principles and practices Conducts simple interviewing projects for mainstream interviewees on non-sensitive topics and gets their honest responses Has natural ability to put people at ease</p> | <p><i>Independently,</i> Knows advanced interviewing and group leadership principles and practices Designs and conducts complex and sensitive interviewing projects with diverse interviewees and gets open, honest responses Has natural ability to help people express thoughts and feelings</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Brings out participants' deepest beliefs, assumptions, feelings Engages incompatible participants in rich dialogue and ideation Understands widely differing points of view</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Shares interviewing methods with others Develops and shares new methods of interviewing to elicit thoughts and feelings on various topics</p> |
| <p>6. Analysis: Understands observations and analyzes them to develop client-relevant themes well substantiated by the observations.</p> | | <p><i>With guidance and supervision,</i> Accurately summarizes what was said in the group, and analyzes underlying themes.</p> | <p><i>Independently,</i> In addition, interprets the findings and weaves the themes into a coherent and integrated view of the marketplace, including the psychological and social factors that are driving it.</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Identifies and interprets the deeper meanings of what was really said, in the light of the knowledge that comes with experience. Accurately interprets the emotional as well as the cognitive meanings.</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Develops and tests hypotheses about sources of the deeper meanings Develops strategies for how consumers and constituents can be persuaded to alter their beliefs and behavior. Develops new analysis and creative tools to develop themes, meanings and persuasion strategies with an understanding and appreciation of the limits of qualitative research.</p> |

| Competency Definition | Your Level | Associate | Professional | Expert | Leader/Innovator |
|---|------------|--|---|--|---|
| BUSINESS & PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES | | | | | |
| <p>7. Communication: Actively and accurately listens to all parties in the research consulting process (clients, respondents, suppliers, and others); writes insightful, clear reports; delivers effective oral presentations in a variety of formal and informal settings, whether prepared or spontaneous.</p> | | <p><i>With guidance and supervision,</i> Restates what parties mean until both agree Possesses excellent written and verbal communication skills in the language being used for the project Drafts reports that address major obvious findings, interpretations, and implications Answers questions about report</p> | <p><i>Independently,</i> Stays in touch with all parties during research process or to track and report progress Drafts reports that address deeper findings, interpretations, and implications Debriefs on these points during research process Prepares reports that convey these points Makes oral presentations in formal settings</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Uses diverse methods of presentation, from spontaneous to high-tech, as appropriate</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Creates, uses, disseminates new methods of presentation</p> |
| <p>8. Professional Practices: Understands and acknowledges the limits of her or his knowledge and capabilities; knows, believes, and practices professional ethics.</p> | | <p><i>With guidance and supervision,</i> Knows specific content and methods and limits project work to those which apply these Developing appreciation of applying code of ethics Works on projects on specific topics and methods assigned Relies on supervisor for materials, skills, technology</p> | <p><i>Independently,</i> Takes projects in areas relatively close to prior experience, refers others to knowledgeable colleagues Relies primarily on familiar methods and consults with knowledgeable colleagues on unfamiliar methods Builds and maintains repertoire of resources (people, materials, skills, techniques and technology) for reference and learning about content and methods Recognizes actual and potential ethical issues in project design and implementation</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Makes knowledgeable judgment calls on gray areas of which projects are appropriate to do and how to do them practically and ethically, Knows when to use or not use particular methods; what and whom to tell about projects Anticipates and prepares for unusual client projects or participant sensitivities Uses non-traditional resources</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i> Creates new resources Creates new practices for unusual client projects participant sensitivities, or responsibilities to society Serves and represents the profession</p> |

| Competency Definition | Your Level | Associate | Professional | Expert | Leader/Innovator |
|---|-------------------|--|--|---|---|
| <p>9. Project Management/Coordination:</p> <p>Sets up, implements, and monitors complex projects, either alone or with subcontractors, in timely, cost-efficient ways that meet client needs</p> | | <p><i>With guidance and supervision,</i></p> <p>Coordinates his/her part in the project efficiently and interfaces smoothly with the other parts of the project.</p> <p>Understands other parts of the project and how it relates to his/her part .</p> | <p><i>Independently</i> performs all apprentice level tasks</p> <p>Completely sets up, implements and monitors all of the qualitative parts of the project in a competent, professional and expeditious manner.</p> | <p>Is able to function as the leader of multidisciplinary projects.</p> <p>Is adept at conducting complex projects, involving multiple suppliers and clients.</p> | <p>Shares systems of project management with others.</p> <p>Develops new systems of project management., communications and feedback.</p> |
| <p>10. Business Practices:</p> <p>Runs an economically sustainable (for profit or non-profit) business. Targets and reaches prospective clients with appealing and beneficial offers of services; negotiates with clients, associates, and suppliers to offer and obtain services at prices satisfactory to all parties; plans and implements appropriate accounting and financial processes to bill, pay, and keep track of transactions, profits and losses, and taxes; makes consulting and supplier agreements consistent with business law.</p> | | <p><i>With guidance and supervision,</i></p> <p>Identifies and reaches current clients and prospects</p> <p>Understands familiar benefits that may appeal to current clients and prospects</p> <p>Takes orders from a price list</p> <p>Makes and reads entries and tracks transactions in an existing accounting system</p> <p>Reads and signs standard consulting agreement and contract forms</p> | <p><i>Independently,</i></p> <p>Identifies and reaches unfamiliar categories of prospects</p> <p>Identifies unfamiliar benefits that appeal to specific clients</p> <p>Develops a price list for familiar services suited to clients and prospects</p> <p>Negotiates with clients, prospects, and suppliers on service, price, terms of payment</p> <p>Sets up and maintains a standard accounting system</p> <p>Bills, collects, and pays on schedule</p> <p>Modifies standard consulting agreement and contract forms to meet specific needs</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i></p> <p>Creates and reaches new categories of prospects</p> <p>Creates new benefit bundles that appeal to clients and prospects</p> <p>Positions and prices products and services competitively and profitably</p> <p>Adjusts existing accounting systems to changing business conditions</p> <p>Chooses from a variety of consulting agreement forms and negotiates with clients/prospects</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i></p> <p>Creates new categories of services, clients, and prospects</p> <p>Develops, positions successfully, and command profitable prices for new services</p> <p>Creates accounting systems tailored to specific business needs</p> <p>Develops consulting agreement forms specific to the transaction</p> |
| <p>11. Commitment to the Profession:</p> <p>In addition to all other qualities: mentors, teaches, and encourages junior and senior consultants; works toward moving the profession forward and elevating it in the eyes of the</p> | | <p><i>With guidance and supervision,</i></p> <p>Shows other professionals of her/his acquaintance what she/he has learned that they may wish to learn or brush up on</p> | <p><i>In addition, independently,</i></p> <p>Offers and requests tips and insights among colleagues via informal channels (e.g., Delphi Forum)</p> <p>Mentors more junior</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i></p> <p>Speaks and writes for diverse public and professional forums on the nature and value of qualitative research</p> <p>Speaks, writes, offers</p> | <p><i>In addition,</i></p> <p>Speaks and writes on new concepts or improved practices and techniques in qualitative research consulting, communication, and business practices.</p> |

| Competency Definition | Your Level | Associate | Professional | Expert | Leader/Innovator |
|---|------------|---|---|---|--|
| <p>public; demonstrates a willingness to give back to the profession by sharing, publishing and teaching; builds and improves upon existing techniques and pioneers new techniques; maintains a fresh outlook on the industry through continued learning and a joyful, positive attitude.</p> | | <p>Corrects lay misconceptions about the profession when she/he hears them</p> <p>Reads professional literature, observes qualitative research of others, and practices.</p> <p>Asks questions to understand and challenge practices and precepts</p> <p>Joins a professional association and attends meetings, workshops, etc.</p> | <p>consultants to prepare the next generation of QRCs</p> <p>Speaks and writes in public forums about the nature and value of qualitative research</p> <p>Keeps up with advances in related fields via professional literature and conferences</p> <p>Serves on a committee in a professional association</p> | <p>workshops or seminars to professionals on consulting, research, or business and professional precepts, techniques, and practices – enriching and reinforcing best practices</p> <p>Participates in informed professional dialogue about “gray areas” of consulting, research, or business and professional practices</p> <p>Takes active role in developing professional association committee products and services</p> | <p>Takes leadership responsibilities in professional associations.</p> |

Section IV: Discussion and Feedback Guide

The Standards

1. After reviewing the standards, what, if anything do you feel need to be changed, added or deleted so that they represent the key competencies needed to be a professional QRC?

The Self-Assessment Tool

1. As you went through this exercise what, if anything, did you feel needs to be changed, added, or dropped with the self-assessment tool?

Is the self-assessment tool:

2. A useful instrument?
 - a. Easy to use?
 - b. Understandable
3. How can the self-assessment tool be improved?
4. Who would use this? For what?

Promotion and Distribution

5. Who should see these standards? (QRCs, kinds of clients, the press, university professors...)
6. How might we best reach them with these standards?
7. What would make them want to use these standards?

Other

8. Please provide any and all feedback about this document and the overall initiative.