Ipsos-MORI points to an XSighting future

Ipsos-MORI, Britain's largest independent research agency, says it's only a matter of time before qualitative data analysis technology becomes the industry standard, not the exception.

The company trialled XSight in mid-2004 and in seven short months the technology began to change researchers' approach to qualitative analysis. Now, benefits are showing up for clients and the agency's bottom line too.

Ipsos-MORI has a strong track record in using technology. It describes its dedicated MR Technology Division as progressive. This is certainly a suitable description given we are talking about a company that instigated WAP and SMS trials, web data collection, online bulletin boards and online reporting in the early days of such technology becoming available. With M-Capi, Ipsos-MORI was also the first to gather data using handheld palm pilots.

Let's be clear – a desire to explore unchartered technological territory and gaining a competitive advantage is a good thing. But although Ipsos-MORI is keen to use technological advances when they can add value to clients' research – it does not believe in technology for technology's sake. And while data analysis programs can be an easy sell to quantitative researchers, how are the qualies taking to it?

"While we've always been forward thinking when it comes to technology, like many other qualies, our initial attitude to data analysis software was based around fear and distrust," says Ipsos-MORI Project Manager Sara Butler.

"We viewed programs like XSight with unease because our belief was it could possibly rob us of our creative thinking – which is essentially what we're paid to do. Software would end up turning us into glorified data organisers.

"Instead, the technology helped us to ramp up the creativity and rigour while saving us time and money along the way."

Qualitative data analysis programs aren't new. Academics have been using software to work with complex unstructured data for years. Ipsos-MORI had previously gleaned some benefit from using Microsoft Excel on large projects – but primarily for data mining. It wasn't able to assist with intelligent, advanced searches, leaving large portions of manual processing work to do.

"When we heard that there was a data analysis package customised for qualitative market research we expected XSight to be MS Excel repackaged into a slightly more advanced program," says Butler.

"What we hadn't expected was just how rigorous and sophisticated XSight would be. It made us step back and take a good look at the thoroughness of our research plan from discussion guides to the analysis set up."

Ipsos-MORI was one of the first companies in the world to trial XSight, which was launched by Australian based software developers QSR International in 2004. QSR's CEO John Owen says the program is designed to assist with the manual processing of data so more time can be dedicated to analysis and strategic thinking.

"We worked closely with a team of international market researchers while we were developing XSight," says Owen.

“At the top of our list was ensuring the program was flexible and able to accommodate idiosyncratic working styles, diverse research areas and the suite of projective techniques researchers use today. For instance, visual imagery exercises, concept research, brand audits, semiotics and visual material that requires content analysis are all practices XSight caters for.”

Butler and her team used XSight on a large national evaluation of the governments’ flagship regeneration programme, ‘New Deal for Communities’. The research study involved both Ipsos-MORI and Sheffield Hallam University working on behalf of the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit. The project was significant - it included nine moderators scattered across the country and close to 80 focus groups. Butler says XSight saved the agency around 78 hours in labour alone when it came time to produce area-specific reports.

“Making sense of large-scale research projects was previously an overwhelming job and physically difficult to manage,” she says.

“The software gave us an opportunity to run an amazingly big qualitative project with a more methodological approach to analysis.”

Butler says Ipsos-MORI used XSight as a virtual whiteboard. Researchers working from multiple locations could share their findings with each other on a daily basis, teasing out emerging trends and refining categories as the project progressed.

The set up itself was relatively pain free. Butler says three researchers were trained and spent half a day setting up a template that could be customised for each of the moderators. Butler was appointed as the XSight Coordinator and was charged with overseeing the whole project. This included refining the template after a short pilot and designing individual versions for each of the moderators, based on their feedback. Then it was down to business.

Butler says rather than having the focus groups transcribed, information was extracted directly from digital audio recordings and inputted straight into the tailored XSight framework.

“Transcribing is always another step in the process and adds length to a project. Before XSight, we’d often have to wait a week or so for the transcripts to come back and then we’d have the task of reading through them all. Not only is this time consuming, but another cost,” explains Butler.

“The time savings we’re getting with XSight on transcribing and reporting means that costs can be lower depending on the size of the project. This is a winner for Ipsos-MORI and our clients.”

Butler says inputting the data directly into the software framework had other advantages too.

“XSight didn’t just assist with the data analysis – it also became a valuable project management tool,” she says.

“During the trial, the moderators had 48 hours to input the data and email it directly to the XSight Coordinator after each focus group. The Coordinator could immediately check the quality of the moderators’ work and offer advice and guidance on any changes needed on the way information was being extracted.

“Using a specially designed observations framework in XSight and their daily journals, the moderators too provided direct feedback to the Coordinator on any changes to the categories they required.

“On a daily basis the whole project team had access to their merged findings on the network. Three words - effective team work.”

At the end of the process, Butler and her team were able to use the software to produce 39 area reports and then quickly produce comparison tables of different participant responses and merge them into one overall report. Each area report was expected to take five hours to produce. Butler says they shaved two hours of work off each report – a staggering 78 hours in total. Definitely good news for Ipsos-MORI and the client.

“The software boosted our ability to manage unstructured data and freed up more time for deeper analysis. Because the data is much easier to view, it also meant an increase in the quality of our analysis and also our confidence in the work.

“Clients seeking social research – especially government clients - at times require detailed evidence to support the findings. With XSight it’s easy to demonstrate the level of rigour behind the analysis and subsequent recommendations. Clients can ask further questions and have them answered within minutes of XSight re-querying the project data. We can go that step further.”

The project over, Ipsos-MORI is still using the software – this time as an organisational tool.

“It’s allowing us to construct an archive to build on future work for our clients,” says Butler.

Internal information sessions about XSight are planned for other Ipsos-MORI researchers and the company expects it to become a key analytical tool. Butler urges other qualies to get past the software “fear factor” and start reaping the benefits of using technology for themselves, their agencies and their clients.

“We hope [*our use of XSight*] is an example of how researchers can embrace developments in analysis technology and use it in a way which can enhance and clarify their thinking,” she says.

QSR’s Owen is optimistic: “I think the industry is at a technological cusp. With companies like Ipsos-MORI showing this type of software has just as much relevance and benefit in the commercial arena as it does in the academic, we think it’s only a matter of time before programs like XSight become the market norm for qualitative market researchers.”

About Ipsos-MORI:

Founded in 1969, Ipsos-MORI is one of Britain's fastest growing market and public opinion research agencies. It provides a full range of quantitative and qualitative research services, working with hundreds of clients in both the private and public sectors. Based in London, Ipsos-MORI adds value to research with interpretation, recommendations, and advice. Ipsos-MORI established its Qualitative HotHouse in 2002, with a specific brief to both create a 'centre of excellence' for qualitative research within the company, and to look at ever more innovative and interesting ways of both doing and using qualitative research, and thereby raising the profile of Ipsos-MORI's qualitative research within the industry.

About QSR International:

QSR International is a leading expert in qualitative solutions and research. The company develops innovative qualitative research software for academic, commercial and Government customers around the world, including Australasia, the UK, Europe and the US. QSR’s software solutions include XSight, a software tool targeted at commercial researchers and NVivo, a software tool for those qualitative researchers dealing with more complex data, who have a need to undertake detailed analysis.

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