

BECOMING A MARKET & SOCIAL RESEARCHER

Ever wondered how new products are developed? Or why customers choose one brand over another? Or what makes the government decide upon a particular policy?

The answer normally involves market and social research. Research informs nearly all levels of economic, social and political decision-making and is a booming industry in the UK, worth over £1 billion a year.

A career in market and social research is fast-moving, intellectually-challenging and diverse, allowing you to get involved in the key decision-making processes of a wide variety of companies and industries, from global corporations to local authorities, from your first day at work.

What is the work like?

Market and social research is used to find out people's opinions and is carried out on behalf of organisations such as businesses, governments and charities. It can be split into two types: quantitative and qualitative.

- Quantitative research involves analysing large amounts of data collected by surveys and questionnaires. It is statistics based and is used to find out how many people do, buy or think a certain way.
- Qualitative research often involves fewer people but asks more in-depth questions. It attempts to understand why people do, buy or think a certain way, by researching their attitudes and opinions as well as their actions.

While some executives are involved in both types of research, it is more usual to find these disciplines split. Researchers may be involved in all or some of the following tasks as part of their day-to-day job:

- discussing what is required with the client and formulating a plan/proposal
- researching a topic
- designing, organising and managing the distribution of surveys/questionnaires
- liaising with and supervising survey staff
- conducting interviews
- analysing and evaluating the results from surveys/questionnaires
- writing and presenting results
- making recommendations to clients about how resulting information could be used.

Most of the work, including research, questionnaire design, and analysis and interpretation of results, is desk-based and requires a good level of computer literacy particularly in the areas of database, spreadsheet and presentation packages. Some positions require regular visits and presentations to clients.

Many of the positions available are within specialist research agencies, but research executives are also employed in-house by large organisations such as manufacturers. They analyse data that is continuously collected and used to identify market trends, competitor performance and opportunities or threats to the business. This is known as working "client side".

The usual starting salary for a research executive is around £18,000- £24,000 a year.

Hours and environment

A full-time researcher would expect to work between 35-40 hours a week, in normal office hours. Occasionally, deadlines may demand evening or weekend work. Qualitative research may require some anti-social working hours as these are the times that it may be most convenient to meet with the respondents involved in a research project. Additional pay or time in lieu would usually be offered to compensate for this.

Most work is office based but as the position becomes more involved, many senior research executives are expected to travel locally, nationally and sometimes internationally to visit clients or in order to undertake qualitative research. A driving licence may be useful.

Salary and other benefits

These figures are only a guide as actual rates of pay can vary depending on the employer and where people live:

- A typical starting salary would be between £18,000 and £24,000 a year.
- An experienced executive (of approximately 3 years' experience) may earn £28,000 - £35,000 a year.
- Senior research executives (of approximately 8 years' experience) may earn between £45,000 and £80,000 a year.

The more senior positions may offer additional benefits such as private health insurance, pensions and profit share schemes.

Skills and personal qualities

A successful research executive should have:

- good written and oral communication skills
- good listening and people skills
- organisational and time-management skills
- computer skills
- mathematical and statistical ability
- an analytical mind
- a creative attitude to resolving problems
- a positive response to responsibility and pressure
- confidentiality

Interests

It is important to:

- enjoy and understand figure work
- be interested in people's behaviour and motivations.

Getting in

The majority of opportunities for market research executives occur in specialist agencies, many of which are based in and around London. Other employers include industrial and commercial organisations, government departments, advertising agencies, charities and research institutes.

Some positions are advertised in the national press. The Market Research Society (MRS) is the professional and business association for the sector. It publishes the industry magazine *Research* and its associated website www.research-live.com, which carry significant numbers of vacancies. Weekly titles such as *Marketing* and *Marketing Week* – which are both available from newsagents – also carry research vacancies, as do the graduate recruitment websites.

Entry for young people

Although there is no standard entry requirement for this post, most research executives hold a degree or higher national diploma (HND). Relevant subject areas include: business studies, marketing, economics, psychology, sociology, mathematics and statistics.

The usual entry requirements for a degree course are three A levels/four H grades plus five GCSEs (A-C)/S grades (1-3), or equivalent. For a BTEC/SQA HND, the normal entry requirements are four GCSEs (A-C)/S grades (1-3) and one A level/two H grades or equivalent. Subject requirements vary depending on the course but usually include English Language and Maths at GCSE/S level. Check with individual colleges or universities for exact entry requirements.

Entry for adults

There is no upper age limit for this profession, though the majority of entrants are in their twenties.

With relevant work experience, formal entry requirements to suitable degree or HND courses may be relaxed. Alternatively, an Access to Higher Education qualification may also be accepted for entry.

Training and Qualifications

Research executives will build upon such skills as questionnaire design, interviewing techniques, analysis and interpretation of data, and time and project management whilst working. There may be workshops or courses to attend to improve or update their skills and knowledge, and MRS also runs several networks such as R-Net (specifically for young researchers) to help people make new contacts and develop their careers. Larger organisations may offer structured training and vocational development schemes such as the MRS Professional Development Scheme. Most employers would expect graduates to study for vocational qualifications.

MRS is a recognised awarding body for market and social research qualifications, offering an MRS/City and Guilds Level 2 Certificate in Market and Social Research, the Advanced Certificate in Market and Social Research Practice and the MRS Diploma in Market and Research Practice. MRS also accredits a number of market and social research Masters Degrees.

MRS, Qualitative Researchers Association of (AQR) and Royal Statistical Society (RSS) are among the professional organisations that hold relevant one-day workshops and conferences. Attendance prices vary. Further information can be found on their websites (see below).

Getting on

Career progression in research can be relatively quick, with many research executives being given the opportunity of a more senior post within two or three years of entry.

Managerial opportunities for executives with flair and commitment are available within agencies and other organisations, and many research executives go on to work as a sole-trader or to set up their own agency. Overseas jobs are also available.

Related jobs

Advertising Account Executive
Advertising Media Planner
Market Research Interviewer
Marketing Manager
Statistician

Further information

The Market Research Society (MRS), 15 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0JR. 020 7490 4911. Website: www.mrs.org.uk

The Association for Qualitative Research (AQR), Davey House, 31 St Neots Road, Eaton Ford, St Neots, Cambridgeshire PE19 7BA. 01480 407227. Website: www.aqr.org.uk

Royal Statistical Society (RSS), 12 Errol Street, London, EC1Y 8LX. 020 7638 8998. Website: www.rss.org.uk

The Social Research Association, (SRA), 175-185 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8UP. 020 7812 0634. Website: www.the-sra.org.uk

MRS
November 2007