Repertory Grid Technique

The Repertory Grid technique was developed by Kelly, an American clinical psychologist, in 1955. He was concerned, as he put it, “to go beyond words” so that he could find more effective ways of exploring how clients linked one idea with other ideas, and how one person might be seen as being similar to and different from others. He believed that people develop hypotheses and theories about their environment, and then test these out, modifying their behaviour as a result. Everybody has their own unique way of “construing” (or thinking about) “elements” (people, things, situations). At any point in time they will have their own system of Personal Constructs.

In an occupational setting, the value of this theoretical approach is that it enables a job analyst to elicit constructs from job holders or managers which are relevant to some aspect of performance. Very often, we are concerned to find out more about what behaviours distinguish good performers from poor performers, or we may want to explore what characterises good attenders and poor attenders. In these circumstances, we might use a group of employees as the “elements”, and then ascertain through carefully probing what made two similar to each other and different from the third, in relation to the way they performed the job. A resulting bi-polar construct might be:-

Warm, caring and approachable ♦ Cool, unsympathetic and distant

This procedure is followed on successive occasions and with a number of informants, with the constructs being plotted on a grid - hence the name of the technique.

Detailed procedure

Since the Repertory Grid technique is simply a structured form of interview, it follows that there is a systematic way of using it when analysing jobs at work.

• Establishing elements to be used
• Sensitising the informant
• Specifying the elements in detail
• Interviewing for constructs
• Analysing the grid
Establishing the elements

This is largely a matter of having a clear idea about the purpose of the activity. Elements could be job holders, past and present, jobs, departments and so on. Indeed, provided that the elements are reasonably homogenous and known to the informant, virtually anything can be used as an element.

Generally, however, in job analysis we are interested in differences between work behaviours and so job holders are our most frequent element. The informant could be a job holder themselves reporting upon peers, a subordinate reporting on bosses, or, and this is the most common option, managers reporting on subordinates.

Sensitising the informant

It is desirable that the informant is focused fully upon the task, since it would be time consuming and non-productive to elicit only trivial constructs.

Sometimes, where there is a group of informants, it may be practical to conduct a group discussion about the kinds of things that seem to be relevant to the group when thinking about behaviour on the job.

Alternatively, the analyst may wish to start an individual interview by giving the informant a little time to reflect on the job, and then jot down the kinds of characteristics that he/she feels are relevant to successful performance.

Specifying elements in detail

The approach here is to have the informant focus upon people who they have observed doing the job under review. Ideally, one might wish to have them think about up to 10 people or elements, split into 5 good and 5 bad performers.

Where there are large groups of job holders, a useful way of narrowing the number of elements is to have the respondent rank order the group on the basis of some critical areas of performance, and then choose the top and bottom five people from the rank order.

Sometimes, the informant may have real difficulty in thinking of this number of people, and it may be necessary to conduct the exercise with only 3 in each performance category.

In any event, you should prepare some index cards or small pieces of paper, number them, and ask the informant to write the names of the poor performers on say cards 1 to 5, and the names of the good performers on cards 6 to 10.
**Interviewing for constructs**

The most usual method of eliciting constructs, is to shuffle the cards with the element names on, and then get the respondent to select three at random. The instruction to the respondent is then, “**Tell me a way in which two of these people are similar to each other, and different from the third, in terms of the way they performed the job.**”

The respondent's initial ideas are noted, although not on the Grid at this stage. The interviewer should explore the idea with the informant in detail, until it is clear that it can be described in clear, precise, behavioural terms. It is useful to use the approach, “**Tell me how I would recognise X in this person’s behaviour**” or “**What kinds of things did he/she actually do**”.

One needs to ensure a good combination of elements, and it may sometimes be necessary to force certain choices of triads. Once a construct has been elicited, it is recorded on the Grid, and the more effective behaviour is starred for future reference.

The respondent is then asked to put all the element cards into two piles, depending on whether the person is at the positive or negative end of the construct. Each person should then be rated on a 7 point scale with 1 being low performance and 7 being high performance on that construct.

**Analysing the grid**

The easiest way is to add the good performers ratings on a construct, and then take away the sum of the poor performers’ ratings. This provides an index of how good that construct is at discriminating between people. Putting all the constructs into a rank order also allows easier distinctions to be drawn.

So, for example, if the informant had been working with 10 named jobholders, in a perfect world the sum of the high performers ratings on a particular construct would theoretically be 35 (i.e. 5 people times a maximum rating of 7), and the low performers sum would be 5, that is 5 people times the minimum rating of 1.

Thus, if we subtract 5 from 35, we would have a perfect discrimination index of 30.

If our poor performer's sum of ratings turned out to be equal to or less than 0, then we would treat the score as 0.
Having calculated the ratings difference for each construct, we can then see whether each construct is a good, moderate or poor discriminator between high and low performers:-

- 20 – 30 = Good
- 10 – 19 = Moderate
- 0 – 9 = Poor

A similar system can be used for any number of elements.

Alternatively, there are computer programs available which allow one to use multi-variate analysis, and see how the constructs cluster together. Where such programs are not available, the analyst must rely on inspection and a rational interpretation of the results.