

Embracing Small-Scale, Rapid Research Design: Building an Evidence Base for the Future

Cassie Taylor and Roberta Borgen

Life Strategies

Introduction

Front-line career development professionals (CDPs) often have a good sense of what is working and what is not in terms of service delivery; however, many lack a robust research background to prove it, as CDP training programs do not typically include courses in research ethics and methodologies. Consequently, many CDPs lack the knowledge and skills necessary to design and implement research studies or to decipher dense and often complex academic research. Many such studies are not even accessible to CDPs, as they are hidden from the public behind the paywalls of academic journals. Often, more rigorous, in-depth studies are prioritized in academia, leaving small-scale demonstration projects, pilots, or exploratory research less likely to receive funding and/or be published. This leaves countless innovative ideas, lessons learned, and recommendations out of view from the broader career development community.

High caseloads and increasingly complex clients require a dedicated focus. Understandably, this does not leave much time for CDPs to find and review new research and even less to actively engage in research conceptualization, implementation,

and analysis. Despite CDPs' nuanced understanding of the realities of career work, generally basic employment outcomes (e.g., duration of unemployment, workshop completion rates) are prioritized, leaving other important outcomes (e.g., self-confidence, mental health) hidden and underreported—what gets measured matters. When partnerships between “researchers” and “practitioners” are formed, creating a shared understanding of what to measure and how to best measure it is essential.

Beyond research skills, CDPs may lack necessary resources (e.g., equipment, time) and/or support from management. It can also be challenging to ensure that vulnerable, multi-barriered individuals are able and willing to give truly informed consent to participate in research.

Together, these realities restrict the ability of CDPs to effectively contribute to the evidence base. However, CDPs are called to support evidence-based practice and evidence generation through their codes of ethics and competency frameworks (see Section 11 of the [APCDA Career Service Competencies](#) and Section E of the [APCDA Ethical Guidelines](#)).

The good news is that research does not have to be complex or complicated to be valid. “Good” research has clear, unbiased objectives; adheres to ethical standards; and follows a thorough, transparent, and reproducible methodology. The interpretation of data is critical and balanced, and conclusions are clearly communicated.

Ethical review boards (ERBs) help ensure these standards are upheld; however, such entities are often only accessible to CDPs who are also working within higher education settings (e.g., professors). CDPs can strengthen their research approach by consulting external resources built on ethical principles—see the [European Charter for Researchers](#) (2018), [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#) (2023), [Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans](#) (2022), and [World Medical Association: Declaration of Helsinki](#) (2024) for some ideas. Alternatively, CDPs may appoint a review committee within their organization, seek peer review, or use an independent ERB (e.g., [Veritas Independent Review Board](#)).

For CDPs struggling to engage in research within their current context, small-scale or “micro-” research is a good option. Broadly, this type of research is typically characterized by a narrow, focused scope, undertaken with limited resources over a relatively short timeframe. As with any research, a standard process applies: (1) define a research question or problem needing exploration; (2) conduct a review of current publications on relevant concepts or ideas; (3) select a suitable methodology to structure the research; (4) collect and analyze the data; and (5) interpret and share the results. The remainder of this paper explores each step relevant to CDPs engaging in micro-research.

Define a Research Question or Problem Needing Exploration

Front-line CDPs are well-positioned to observe innovative practices, program adaptations, and new opportunities. Micro-research can help formalize and validate the lessons learned so that others can adjust their approach. Front-line CDPs also have a front-row seat to witness the challenges, frustrations, and service gaps impeding client progress. With a clear definition of the problem, CDPs can channel their outrage into action through micro-research projects—carving out something manageable, yet meaningful.

As you seek clarity on your specific research question and the problem you would like to tackle, review the 2023 CERIC report, [10 Megatrends That Will Shape Work and Careers in 2040](#). In this report, you will find well-known factors such as artificial intelligence and automation, reconciling the impacts of colonialism, and declining mental health and well-being that may spark your thinking.

In reflecting on this stage of the research process, consider the following questions:

- What concerns are most pressing for your work?
- What innovations in practice do you see that others could learn from?
- Which specific question interests you?

Conduct a Literature Review

To supplement real-world experience and knowledge, CDPs need to look broadly at a wide range of academic and professional sources. Academic resources include traditional research journals—some of which are open access, while others are restricted. Here are a few relevant journals for CDPs: [Asia Pacific Career Development Journal](#);

[*Australian Journal of Career Development*](#); [*British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*](#); [*Canadian Journal of Career Development*](#); [*Career Development International*](#); and [*Gender, Work, and Organization*](#).

Professional resources can include key informants, communities of practice, professional associations' blogs and publications, social media platforms and accounts, conferences, workshops, and other news repositories.

We prefer to use the term “environmental scan” rather than “literature review” to reflect the diversity of resources. The credibility of any resource is important to assess when reviewing information. Consider the date of the publication, the objectivity of the source, and evidence of neutrality.

In reflecting on this stage of the research process, consider the following questions:

- What sources do you have access to?
- What other information do you need?

Choose a Methodology

Although a large-scale, double-blind true experimental design is often considered the “gold standard” of research, this may not be appropriate, necessary, or feasible in practice. In the spirit of micro-research, there are numerous alternative approaches available. Whichever methodology you choose, the key is to select something that is simple and manageable within your context. It should be an approach that you are both comfortable with and confident in implementing as a researcher.

Surveys and **questionnaires** are common tools used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. They are useful for gathering opinions, behaviors, or demographic information relatively quickly through a series of questions administered via online or paper-based forms.

Interviews are generally more narrowly focused than surveys or questionnaires and provide an opportunity to explore qualitative prompts in greater depth regarding the interviewee's thoughts and experiences. A related method involves **focus groups**, where a facilitator guides structured group discussions to explore collective perspectives on a topic, rather than just one contributor's ideas.

Researchers may make **observations** by systematically recording behaviors or events as they occur or use **sensors** or **trackers** to collect environmental or physiological data. They may also gain access to **documents** or **archival** data to identify themes and patterns or reanalyze **secondary data**

Ethnographic methods involve immersion into an existing cultural group or community with the goal of fostering a deep understanding of their cultural practices and values. With micro-research, that level of immersion may be difficult to accomplish, so a more narrowly focused **case study**—centered on specific individuals or situations—may be more feasible.

Collect and Analyze Data

In the context of micro-research in particular, it is important to avoid overcomplicating the data collection process. Convenience and snowball sampling methods are common in the micro-research context. Simply put, this means recruiting from a pool of participants to which you already have access (e.g., program participants, clients) and asking people in your network, as well as those who have already agreed to participate in the research, to share the opportunity. This can be accomplished by building on existing processes and opportunities (e.g., intake forms, check-in meetings, exit interviews, progress surveys, reporting metrics, email

signature lines, waiting rooms). Remain aware of the influence of multiple relationships and ensure that the research is presented as separate from service—participation in research is always optional and confidential.

Monitor information as it is collected to ensure that there are no external influences. In a recent study, bots seeking to identify the participation incentive overwhelmed our online survey, leading our team to quickly implement several bot-elimination strategies (e.g., using CAPTCHAs, checking time to survey completion, including and reviewing open-ended questions). More strategies are detailed [here: https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/jst/article/view/14331/12955](https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/jst/article/view/14331/12955)

Clean and organize the data, store it securely, and use an appropriate approach—outlined in the methodology—to analyze it. This might include descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies, percentages) or inferential statistics (e.g., correlations, predictive analysis) for quantitative approaches or thematic analysis for qualitative data. Avoid over-analyzing a small dataset or conducting too many ad hoc analyses (i.e., unplanned, after the fact). Let your methodology and the data guide the process.

In reflecting on this stage of the research process, consider the following questions:

- How and when will you gather data?
- What will you do with the data when you receive it?

Interpret and Share the Results

After data analysis is complete, turn to contextualizing the results for a wider audience. Micro-research in practice focuses on something relatively specific, so it is important to clearly state the limitations of your research and avoid overinterpretation.

Although conclusions and recommendations may be applicable to other contexts, additional research on a larger scale may be necessary. Micro-research that serves as a pilot study is an excellent way to demonstrate the value of investing in full-scale research based on preliminary results.

Consider how and where you will share the results of your micro-research. In some instances, this might be among your colleagues during an informal “lunch and learn” or through a more formal presentation at a conference. You might visually represent the data in an infographic or share stories on a podcast. In all cases, strive to communicate the deeper meaning and importance of the data you collect.

In reflecting on this stage of the research process, consider the following questions:

- Who would be most interested in your findings?
- How and where will you “publish”?

Final Thoughts

Identify something you are passionate about and pinpoint something small you can do—even a one-question survey for clients as they transition out of your service can elicit meaningful data. Start small and establish your comfort as a “researcher.” Take courses to expand your knowledge or partner with or consult researchers in the field.

CDPs are at the heart of the career development process and can also be at the heart of evidence generation.