



Partnership for Health Analytic Research, LLC

## THE DELPHI PANEL

### Using Quantitative Methods to Improve the Advisory Process

Michael Broder, M.D., M.S.H.S

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A quantitative method called the RAND/UCLA modified Delphi process can improve organizational information gathering, thus improve decision-making. We have extensive experience with this technique and have used it to assist academic, government, not-for-profit, and for-profit organizations in making consensus-based judgments that draw on the collective wisdom of advisors.

The modified Delphi expert panel process has been in use for decades—mostly in academic settings to improve the quality of healthcare. The technique was originally described by the RAND Corporation in the 1940's. There are hundreds of articles in academic journals describing its use.

The process involves developing a comprehensive understanding of the information desired from the board, creating a detailed, written questionnaire, and requiring advisors to complete it before an in-person meeting. At the meeting, advisors review the results of the initial questionnaire to identify areas of agreement and disagreement. Their discussion typically lasts a full day or more and a trained, impartial moderator keeps the focus on areas of disagreement. At the end of the meeting they repeat the questionnaire. The second round results are tallied and interpreted “offline,” providing the organization with a quantitative view of the advisors’ opinions and their level of agreement. The advisors never have to formally achieve consensus.

Participants usually enjoy these meetings. They engage in stimulating conversation on a topic of mutual interest. They are “protected” from arguments by the moderator who encourages them to share their views without trying to convince others of their position. The companies find the data they gather more useful than data gathered in an unstructured setting and less prone to misinterpretation.

The method works well to answer difficult, multifaceted questions that have enduring significance to the company. We have used the modified Delphi process to help a pharmaceutical company design a clinical trial in a setting in which multiple experts had contradictory recommendations, to gain consensus on improving terminology and classifications for common diseases, and to develop a technique for reviewing medical records to determine if the care provided met acceptable standards. In all these situations, the traditional process of gathering individuals to discuss the problem and arrive at a solution had not been fruitful.

The Delphi process produces more reliable results than traditional consensus exercises. In one study, different groups using parallel Delphi processes were presented with the same data. Their conclusions were much more similar than groups that used unstructured processes. It is the only method that has been shown to produce clinical practice guidelines that actually improve health. That is, patients whose care follows guidelines developed using the Delphi process have better health than those whose care does not.

Life sciences businesses frequently employ advisory groups to guide strategic and tactical planning. Research over the past two decades has convinced many in the healthcare community that a methodologically rigorous approach to such panels yields better results.

We have extended the use of the RAND/UCLA process to answer business questions in the life-science industry, applying it to issues of interest to medical device, pharmaceutical, and biotech companies. For more information on how this process may help your company, please contact us directly.

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