

THE DELPHI TECHNIQUE

What is it?

The Delphi technique has been described as a method for structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem.

Where does it come from?

It has its origins in the Cold War in the 1950s when the Rand Corporation, funded by the US Air Force, was trying to find a way to establish reliable consensus of opinion among a group of experts about how Soviet military planners might target the US industrial system in an attack and how many atomic bombs would be needed to have a specified level of impact on US military capability. This was the original 'Project Delphi'.

What is it used for?

Fifty years later, it is widely used for more peaceful purposes, but with the same underlying rationale: to establish as objectively as possible a consensus on a complex problem, in circumstances where accurate information does not exist or is impossible to obtain economically, or inputs to conventional decision making for example by a committee meeting face to face are so subjective that they risk drowning out individuals' critical judgements.

It is a family of techniques, rather than a single clearly-understood procedure, but the typical features of a Delphi procedure are an expert panel; a series of rounds in which information is collected from panelists, analysed and fed back to them as the basis for subsequent rounds; an opportunity for individuals to revise their judgements on the basis of this feedback; and anonymity for their individual contributions.

How is it used for the ELTons Innovation Awards?

The ELT Innovation Awards is a complex problem requiring structured decision-making but where, by using the Delphi procedure, it is possible for the judges to arrive at a consensus in their choice of the strongest entries and so in their ultimate choice of award. The format we use has a panel of six or seven judges for each category, working at a distance, with all communication by email through a facilitator. There are three separate stages, a first round, a shortlisting round and a judging round. In each round panelists are first asked to comment on the entries or the products, and these comments are shared anonymously, followed by one, two or three rounds in which panelists nominate their preferred entries. The number of rounds depends on how quickly a consensus emerges.

Panelists send their responses to the moderator, who collates them and circulates them after each round, as the basis for the next round. The panelists have at each stage a full record of what comments and nominations other panelists have made, but they do not know who made which comment or who voted for which entry. Nor do they know the final result. Like the rest of the audience at the awards party, the judges themselves do not know the outcome until the envelope is opened.

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