METHODOLOGY PAPER

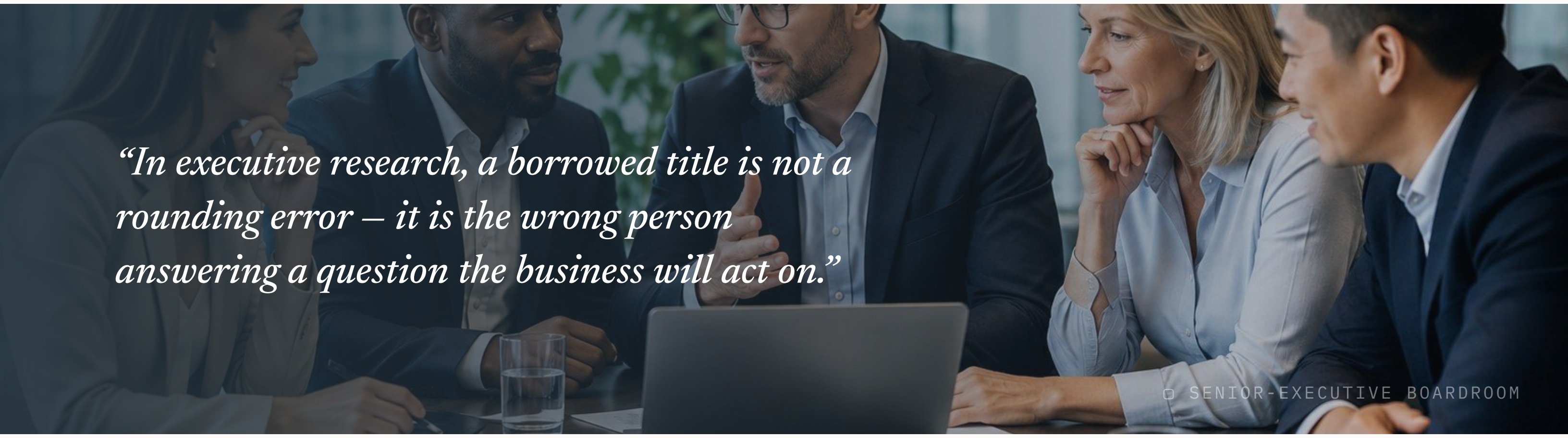
B2B RESEARCH · DECISION AUTHORITY

C-Suite & *Senior-Executive* Sample

A Methodology for Verifying Decision Authority in B2B Research

The respondent who matters in executive research is defined not by an impressive title but by genuine authority over the decision your study is about. This paper is a vendor-neutral guide to that distinction — a four-level authority taxonomy, the decision-making unit behind every B2B purchase, and how to verify authority that no external registry can confirm.

PUBLISHED BY	SERIES	READING TIME	EDITION
CatalystMR Research Team	Methodology Papers	~18 minutes	2026



CATALYSTMR
transforming market research data into marketing solutions

ABSTRACT

Executive research informs the decisions a business can least afford to get wrong — strategy, pricing, vendor selection, go-to-market. The variable that decides whether the data can be trusted is not the seniority of the respondents but their **decision authority**: whether the people answering actually own, fund, or shape the decision the study is about. A panel full of impressive titles can still be the wrong sample.

This paper concentrates on that one problem. It separates **seniority from authority**; sets out a four-level **authority taxonomy**; maps the **decision-making unit** that shares any significant B2B purchase, so a study can specify which seats it needs; and tackles the hard part — verifying authority when, unlike a physician's licence, **no external registry** can confirm who owns a budget. Specification, feasibility, mode choice, and post-field QC are covered in companion papers; here they appear only where decision authority touches them.

CONTENTS

WHO THIS IS FOR

Client-side insights and research buyers commissioning executive studies; **agency and B2B researchers** designing and fielding them; and **procurement and strategy leaders** evaluating sample partners for high-value work. No prior sampling expertise is assumed; practitioners can skip to Section 02.

01 THE PROBLEM

A senior title is the wrong qualifier for an executive study.

It is tempting to define an executive sample by title — "VPs and above," "C-suite." But the question an executive study actually needs answered is whether the respondent has **authority over the specific decision in scope**. Title and authority overlap, but they are not the same variable, and three things keep them apart.

A title travels; authority is local to a decision

The same "VP of IT" may own the security-tooling decision at one firm and merely be consulted on it at another, where procurement or a CISO holds the call. Authority is a property of a person, a decision, and a moment — not a property of the title alone. A sample defined by title silently mixes owners, influencers, and bystanders of the very decision the study is about.

Title inflation is structural, not occasional

Where an incentive rewards qualifying, self-reported seniority comes under pressure: a manager rounds up to "director," or a respondent claims budget authority they only influence, because they sense which answer the screener rewards. This is a structural risk wherever eligibility rests on unverified self-report — and it is why authority has to be **verified by the structure of the questions**, not accepted from a profile field.[1]

The cost of one borrowed title is asymmetric

Executive studies are small-n and high-stakes. In a study of forty budget-owners, a single respondent who borrowed a title can visibly bend a finding that goes on to inform strategy or a major investment. The rarer and more senior the audience, the more each completion has to be the right person — not merely a senior one.

> THE THROUGHLINE
>
> **Seniority is not authority.** This paper resolves that distinction deliberately — naming the levels of authority (Section 02), mapping who shares a decision (Section 03), and verifying authority where no registry exists (Sections 04–05) — rather than hoping an impressive title stands in for the right respondent.

02 THE TAXONOMY

Name the level of authority your study actually needs.

"Are you senior?" invites a yes. The more useful question is which of these four roles a respondent holds for the specific decision in scope. Defining the level you need — before fielding — is what turns a vague "decision-maker" target into a sample you can verify and audit.

LEVEL 1

Final decision-maker

Holds the ultimate say; the decision does not proceed without them.

LEVEL 2

Budget owner

Controls the funds the decision draws on, whether or not they choose the option.

LEVEL 3

Influencer

Shapes the choice through expertise or veto, but does not own it outright.

LEVEL 4

Recommender

Evaluates and recommends options up the chain for a decision made above them.

Why the level has to be explicit

A study that asks only for "decision-makers" will collect all four levels and treat them as one — blending the person who signs with the person who suggests. For some research that mix is acceptable; for most executive work it is fatal, because the strategic weight of an answer depends entirely on whether the respondent could actually act on it. State the minimum level, per decision, in the spec.

Levels are per-decision, not per-person

The same executive can be a Level 1 decision-maker for one category and a Level 3 influencer for another. Authority is assigned relative to the decision the study is about, which is why a generic seniority screen cannot capture it and why the category must be named before the level can be judged.

PRINCIPLE

Decide the **minimum authority level** and the **specific decision** together, and write both into the spec. "Director-plus" is a seniority floor; "owns or co-owns the security-tooling budget" is an authority definition — and only the second can be verified.

03 THE BUYING GROUP

One B2B decision, several seats at the table.

Significant B2B purchases are rarely made by one person. They are made by a **decision-making unit** — a group whose members play different roles in the same decision. An executive study has to decide not just how much authority it needs (Section 02) but which seats at that table it is sampling, because each sees the decision differently.

A TYPICAL DECISION-MAKING UNIT FOR ONE PURCHASE

SEAT
Decider
Holds final sign-off on whether the purchase proceeds.

SEAT
Economic buyer
Owns the budget and the business case behind it.

SEAT
Technical buyer
Judges fit against requirements; can rule options out.

SEAT
End user
Lives with the choice; speaks to day-to-day fit.

SEAT
Gatekeeper
Controls access and information into the group.

The same person may occupy more than one seat — and in different purchases, the seats are held by different people.

Specify the seats, not just the seniority

A study of "IT decision-makers" that does not say which seats may end up over-weighted with technical buyers and end users — informative voices, but not the economic buyer whose budget the research is meant to inform. Naming the seats you need (and the ones you explicitly exclude) is part of a defensible executive specification.

Map seats to authority levels

The two frameworks work together: the decision-making unit tells you which role at the table a respondent occupies; the four-level taxonomy tells you how much authority that role carries for this decision. Specifying both is what lets a provider target — and later verify — the right voices rather than a crowd of plausible titles.

04 THE CORE METHOD

There is no register of who owns a budget.

A physician's specialty can be matched against a medical register; a financial licence can be looked up. **Decision authority has no such external source.** No public database records who owns the security-tooling budget at a given firm. That single fact shapes the entire verification method for executive sample: because authority cannot be looked up, it must be established through the **structure and content of the questions** — and corroborated for consistency.

CREDENTIAL AUDIENCES (NO. 132)

Verify against a registry

A claimed credential is matched to an authoritative external record — a medical-council listing, a provider registry. The evidence exists independently of the respondent.

AUTHORITY AUDIENCES (THIS PAPER)

Verify by question structure

No external record exists, so authority is established within the instrument — behavioural detail, an open-end that is hard to fabricate, and answers that must remain consistent with one another.

What stands in for a registry

In the absence of a lookup, four signals together make a claim of authority credible — no one of them alone, but the combination: **behavioural specifics** (the most recent decision made, the vendor selected, the approval path), **an open-end** describing how a real decision unfolded (hard to fabricate convincingly), **internal consistency** across logically linked questions, and **cross-checks** against firmographics and stored profile data. The MRS Code of Conduct's requirement that researchers take reasonable steps to ensure findings are not misleading applies directly: where authority cannot be proven externally, it must be tested rigorously internally.[2]

THE DISTINCTION THAT MATTERS

Treat a respondent's stated title as a **hypothesis** and their answers to behavioural and open-ended authority questions as the **evidence**. Where the two diverge, the evidence — not the title — decides whether the respondent belongs in the study.

05 SCREENER DESIGN

Ask so that the answer is verifiable.

If authority is verified inside the instrument, the screener is the instrument doing the verifying. A good executive screener admits the right people and builds the evidence trail used to confirm them. Four design moves do most of the work.

Four moves that make authority checkable

- **Name the category first** — qualify on the specific decision ("the security-tooling decision"), not a generic "IT purchasing."
- **Ask behaviourally** — what was decided, when, which vendor, through what approval path — not "are you a decision-maker?"
- **Capture an authority open-end** — a short account of a real decision, reviewed by a human, where the stakes justify it.
- **Separate function from seniority** — record them as distinct fields so neither masks the other.

Then make it consistent

Consistency traps — logically linked questions whose answers must agree — catch the respondent who selects the rewarded seniority without holding the role. Asked across the category, the seat, and the authority level, they turn a single over-claim into a visible contradiction. The aim is not to interrogate genuine executives but to make a borrowed title hard to sustain across an instrument designed to test it.

REACHING THE MOST SENIOR

The most senior cells are also the hardest to reach online; telephone (CATI) and mixed-mode are often the answer — the subject of Paper No. 135.

AUTHORITY VERIFICATION IS DESIGNED IN, NOT CLEANED UP

Because there is no registry to fall back on, the screener is the verification. An executive study that leaves authority to a single self-reported title — and hopes to "clean" the data later — has no evidence to clean against. The questions are the evidence.

06 WORKED EXAMPLE

One decision, verified end to end.

To make the method concrete, here is one executive target run through it: **the budget owner for an enterprise cybersecurity-platform decision at large firms.** The example is qualitative by design — it shows the shape of the dec[illegible] numbers.

STEP 1

Name the decision & level

The study needs a **Level 2 budget owner** (Section 02) for one specific decision — the enterprise security-tooling purchase — not "senior IT" in general. The level and the category are written into the spec together.

STEP 2

Pick the seat

Within the decision-making unit (Section 03), the target is the **economic buyer** — explicitly not the technical buyer or end user, whose views are valuable but answer a different question. The excluded seats are named so the field cannot drift toward easier-to-reach voices.

STEP 3

Screen behaviourally

Eligibility rests on what the respondent did (Section 05): the most recent tooling decision, the vendor chosen, the approval path, the budget owned — plus a short open-end describing how the decision unfolded,

WHERE THIS SERIES GOES DEEPER

No. 131	**Specification & sourcing.** Turning an executive audience into auditable variables and sourcing it transparently.
No. 134	**Feasibility & incidence.** Modelling how rare a senior, category-specific target is before launch.
No. 135 · 137	**Mode & quality.** Reaching the most senior by CATI/mixed-mode, and the eleven-point QC framework.

▲ CONCLUSION

Verify the authority, not the title.

Executive sample is trustworthy when the people answering genuinely own, fund, or shape the decision the study is about. Separate seniority from authority; name the authority level and the specific decision; specify which seats of the decision-making unit you need; and — because no registry can confirm authority — verify it through behavioural questions, open-ends, and consistency, designed into the screener rather than hoped for afterwards. Do that, and a hard-to-reach senior audience becomes a data file you can stake a strategy on. The ESOMAR, MRS, and ISO 20252 frameworks exist precisely so buyers can ask for this rigour in consistent terms — and recognise it when they see it.[1,2,3]

§ REFERENCES

[1] ESOMAR. **37 Questions to Help Buyers of Online Samples.** Amsterdam: ESOMAR, 2023. esomar.org

[2] The Market Research Society. **MRS Code of Conduct.** London: MRS. (The professional standard requiring, among other duties, that researchers take reasonable steps to avoid misleading findings.) mrs.org.uk

[3] International Organization for Standardization. **ISO 20252:2019 — Market, opinion and social research, including insights and data analytics — Vocabulary and service requirements.** Geneva: ISO, 2019.

[4] ICC/ESOMAR. **International Code on Market, Opinion and Social Research and Data Analytics.** ICC & ESOMAR.

Standards and professional codes are cited for the buyer-evaluation, conduct, and quality-management frameworks referenced. The decision-making-unit and authority-level frameworks are presented as established B2B research concepts, not as proprietary models. Methodological principles stated without a citation (e.g. the distinction between seniority and decision authority) are definitional. This paper publishes no incidence, title-inflation, or fraud figures; any figure specific to a study should be modelled from that study's own data.

§ ABOUT

CatalystMR

CatalystMR is a global market-research panel and fieldwork partner specialising in **hard-to-reach B2B, executive, and niche audiences**. We verify decision authority through screener design rather than title alone, and pair verified online sample with live telephone (CATI) capability for the senior targets online cannot reach — under one screener, one QC standard, and one point of contact.

We publish our own responses to ESOMAR's 37 Questions and design authority verification into every executive engagement rather than treating quality as a post-field cleanup.

Compliance posture: our methodology is aligned to the ESOMAR Code and Guidelines, the MRS Code of Conduct, and the ISO 20252 framework, and we are certified under the EU-U.S., UK, and Swiss Data Privacy Frameworks, with personal data siloed from response data.

EXECUTIVE SAMPLE | DECISION AUTHORITY | DECISION-MAKING UNIT | MRS | ESOMAR 37 | ISO 20252

Tell us the decision, the authority level, and the seats you need, and we'll design the verification and return a modelled feasibility range — typically within 24 hours — not a hopeful number.

sales@catalystmr.com
1-800-819-3130
catalystmr.com