

CONDUCTING AN INTERVIEW

Use this sheet to help you:

- identify the interview style to suit your research purposes
- plan the interview
- keep your interviewee (and yourself) at ease
- avoid common interviewing mistakes
- manage data collected in the interview

5 minute self test

Before you read the Helpsheet, consider the five questions below:

1. What planning might you need to do before an interview?
2. What are some different interview styles you could use?
3. What are some different question types you could use?
4. What could you do to help your interviewee relax?
5. What is the best way to record data collected in an interview?

Read on for answers to all five questions

Introduction

When doing qualitative research, there is often the need to conduct interviews for the purposes of data collection. This Helpsheet will assist you by focussing on six stages of the interview process:

1. Setting the interview context
2. Planning the interview
3. Constructing questions
4. Starting and finishing the interview
5. Conducting the interview
6. Managing data collected during an interview

1. Setting the interview context

An interview cannot be done well if the questions being asked are inappropriate or uninformed. It is essential that the analyst has a good understanding of the context of the situation before beginning an interview. If conducting an interview with company employees, for example, the analyst needs to understand the organisation and its industry setting. If the research is being done for a company, the analyst needs a clear understanding of the objectives and aims of the research project. All this involves reviewing such things as:

- organisational reports
- annual reports
- strategic and operational plans
- statements of mission or goals
- existing procedure manuals and
- systems documentation

Analysts must also understand common technical terminology appropriate to the context of the area under investigation. They also need to be familiar with the problems and issues associated with that industry. We cannot detail specifics here as these are highly variable. Suffice to say, before an interview is attempted the analyst must be familiar with the context in order to ask intelligent questions. There is nothing more unprofessional than an interviewer who does not know what questions to ask!

2. Planning the interview

Once the context is understood, detailed interview plans must be prepared. This involves:

- Deciding on the type of interview you want to conduct (see below).

- Preparing a list of topics to be covered. It is critical that important points are not overlooked. Devise topics before considering questions as you will forget important topics if you start by writing questions.
- Arranging the order of topics carefully. Interviews need to follow a logical progression. Generally it is best to move from the most general topics to more specific topics. For example, if you were interviewing a manager in a company, it would be better to start with topics about company operations and aims, and go on to topics dealing with more specific issues concerning staffing and products.
- Considering the target population, i.e. who you will interview. This will depend on the kind of interview you are conducting and its purpose. It may consist of all the stakeholders (everyone in the company or organisation) or a local sub-set of them. It is important to consider how “local sub-set” is defined. Does it consist of people in the organisation or customers as well?
- Scheduling interviews. A good interview should proceed from the top down. Heads of departments or sections (Managers, CEOs) are usually interviewed before employees who report to them.
- Allocating time. How much time will be given to each topic area? Why?
- Devising questions carefully for each topic.
- Considering operational issues. For example, how are you going to record answers? Will you tape the interview? Will you take notes? Taped interviews have the advantage of allowing the analyst to concentrate on keeping the interviewee at ease, but they have the disadvantage of requiring large amounts of taped material which needs to be transcribed.

When these things are sorted out, you are ready to commence the interview.

Types of Interview:

1. Informal conversations

These are spontaneous and take place in corridors or over coffee. They have the advantage of allowing free-ranging responses and conversations that are natural. The interviewee feels at ease and does not realise they are being interviewed. They have the disadvantage of taking a lot of time in order to collect sufficient data. They also require a lot of skill in order to obtain useful data (as opposed to extraneous general comments) and the data collected is very hard to analyse because it has been informally expressed. Of course, there are ethical issues that may prevent the use of such interviews for formal research projects.

Typical informal interview question: “So, how’s the job going”?

2. Semi-structured interview

These interviews use a general guide and a list of topics and questions. They have the advantage of allowing an interviewer to concentrate on specific topics and issues and are more focussed than informal conversations. Like informal conversations, however, they have the disadvantage of requiring great skill in order to keep the interview focussed on the intended topics and minimising extraneous material.

Typical semi-structured interview question: “What do you think about X”?

3. Standard structured interviews

These are very well-structured and involve setting precise questions which are asked of all interviewees. They have the advantage of consistency and they are more efficient to conduct (less time is wasted in getting to the point or purpose of the interview). A number of interviewees can be used as the questionnaire is the same. Therefore more data can be collected. The questions are more focussed and precise as they have been designed carefully. They are easy to analyse because the questions are precisely worded. These interviews may have the disadvantage of not allowing the exploration of unanticipated topics that may arise during the interview. They may also be too formal in tone and may make interviewees feel uncomfortable.

Typical structured interview question: "Which do you feel the most appropriate response to the statement X: a) ... b) ...c) ... d)?"

4. Focus group interviews and group interviews

Focus group and group interviews use a selected group of representative people in order to collect data about a larger population. They have a different structure, however. While group interviews are "rectangular" in shape, focus group interviews have a "triangular" structure.

The aim in a focus group interview is to start with general questions, then ask some transition questions, and then move to the focus questions (the main things you want to know). If the interview terminates before the focus question(s) are addressed, it has failed.

In a group interview, the order and arrangement of questions are less important. If the interview terminates before the end, it can be continued on another day or by another interviewer.

3. Preparing questions

A: Open and closed questions

In a good interview, the person being interviewed talks and the interviewer listens. It is important that questions are designed to allow for this to occur. There are two main types of questions: 1. closed questions and 2. open-ended questions.

Closed questions, as the name suggests, are easy to answer and lead to a "yes" or "no" response, or lead to some other brief reply. They are questions that a detective might ask when trying to establish facts, e.g., "Did you attend the meeting last night at 8pm?" Questions like this seem to encourage a brief reply. These questions can be a disaster for qualitative data collection because they limit the data being collected. However, they can be used for certain kinds of questions, e.g., "Does your company have plans to do business in Asia in the next 3-5 years? (Yes/No)". They are questions that begin with words such as "with whom", "where", "when", "which", "does" or "did."

Open-ended questions cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” response and thus encourage the interviewee to provide more information. This can lead to rich and useful data. Open-ended questions begin with such words as what, how or tell me. For example, “What happens when you attend meetings with the manager”?

Closed questions:

- set limits on the type, level and amount of information interviewee provides
- often provide a choice of alternatives
- can require a bipolar or multiple choice response
- can be used for clarifying or probing questions or as feedback
- are less time consuming for specific information
- make note-taking easier
- sometimes can get too little information
- may stop interviewee from volunteering information
- require an excellent command of vocabulary and concepts

Open-ended questions:

- are broad and place few constraints on the interviewee
- can be used for determining scope of understanding and response certainty
- can allow the expert to express information that the analyst does not know about
- can allow identification of the interviewee’s vocabulary, concepts, frames of reference
- can help with explanations and underlying theory

(Kremer, 2005)

B: How many questions?

An interview that is too long will not be successful. Ensure that you are asking for information that will be used in your project and do not waste time asking for information that is merely for interest.

C: Appropriate words and phrases

Emotionally charged words and phrases can bias the responses received. For example, don’t ask a question about “problem areas” in the company; ask about “issues that might be important”. Don’t ask about “cumbersome processes” ask whether “all processes are operating efficiently”.

Similarly, avoid the use of:

- abbreviations or acronyms
- slang and colloquialisms
- discipline “jargon”
- local issues or concerns
- name dropping (mentioning important people)
- controversial issues

D: Problems to avoid in question design

Here are some common problems associated with question design:

1. Ambiguous questions: Questions where there is more than one meaning will lead to confusion and/or misleading data. Avoid them. An example is: "Describe the best way to get to the airport?" (Does "best way" mean quickest or cheapest?) In some cases, the question itself is not ambiguous but a particular word in the question means different things for different people (e.g. "efficient").

2. Double-barrelled questions: These ask for more than one response. Example: "Do you think that this company is operating efficiently or does it just need more employee commitment?"

3. Leading questions: These lead the answer in the way they are asked: "Many senior employees think that X. I suppose this is your view as well. Is it?"

4. Unevadeable questions: Some questions have answers that cannot be evaded. A classic example is: "So have you stopped beating your wife?" (The response does not allow someone to avoid the implication of being a wife-beater).

5. Negative questions: Questions that use the word "not" and can be hard to answer. Example: "Why is it not easy to do a master's degree?" Compare: "What are the factors that cause difficulties for master's students?" Always phrase questions in the positive form.

6. Non-question questions: These are really concealed statements made by the interviewer. Example: "It's really hard to function effectively in this corporate environment, isn't it?"

7. Knowledge-implying questions: These assume (sometimes falsely) that the interviewee knows about an issue. Avoid these by first asking a question that ascertains the level of knowledge or ignorance about the issue first, then ask a substantive question about what they might know.

8. Prestige bias questions: These questions are likely to guarantee exaggeration e.g. questions about income level, occupation, level of education. Example: "What is your income?" Avoid these or phrase them neutrally e.g. "Which of the following best describes your level of income: 1. \$30-40,000 2. \$50-60,000 3. \$70-150,000?"

9. Denial questions: These will almost certainly lead to denial or understatement. Respondents may also understate or falsify their age, level of prejudice, etc. "How old are you?" will seldom get a truthful answer. Use the following: "Which of the following best describes your age range: 1. 28-35 years, 2. 36-45 years ..."

10. Non-frame of reference questions: These ask a question but do not give a frame of reference so are unclear. Example: "Are all your production deadlines being met?" (The time is unclear). Compare: "Have all your production deadlines been met, 1. over the past 2 years, 2. over the past 5 years?"

11. Artificial opinion questions: These questions create an opinion on a topic on which the interviewee really may have no opinion. Example: "Do you think everyone is happy working in this company"? Avoid these as they bias the responses. Allow for a "Don't know" or "Have no opinion" option. "Do you have an opinion on whether people/employees are happy working for this company"?

12. Personal questions: These questions make issues very personal and make the interviewee feel uncomfortable or unwilling to answer. Example: "Are you happy working in this company?" Compare: "Do you have an opinion on whether people/employees are happy working for this company?"

13. Direct and indirect questions: These questions need not be problems but their use depends on the question being asked. Sometimes 'direct' questions are better, sometimes 'indirect' questions are better. There are a number of kinds ranging from direct to indirect:

- "You": "Are you comfortable with X"? (Very direct)
- "Numbered cards": "Look at the following numbered cards and select which is best describes what occurred." (Less direct)
- "Everybody": "Everybody in the company seems to think that "X": Can you comment on this?" (More Indirect)
- "Other people": "Do you think that other people think that X"? (Very Indirect)

4. Starting and finishing the interview

Always ensure your interviewee is clear about your purpose and objectives, and allay their concerns. Inform them that your purpose is to find out about issues and processes and not necessarily about personal information.

To open an interview:

- introduce yourself
- state the purpose of the interview
- address any concerns raised by the interviewee
- explain that brief notes will be taken (or a tape recording will be made) and shared with the interviewee after they have been organized

To close an interview:

- Briefly summarise the areas that have been discussed, highlighting the important facts and your understanding of them. This lets the interviewee know that you have been listening carefully during the interview and provides an opportunity for clarifying any misunderstandings
- During the summary, as well as during the entire interview, adopt a posture of objectivity and avoid personal comments, observations, or conclusions
- Finally, in closing, you must thank the interviewee for the time and ask if a shorter follow-up interview can be scheduled at a later date if necessary

When all areas on the interview outline have been explored, ask:

- “Is there anything we’ve overlooked?” or,
- “What other areas should I have asked you about?”

This encourages the interviewee to discuss issues that should have been covered.

(Kremer, 2005)

*NB: Some interviewers find it easier to summarise as the interview progresses. Sometimes interviewees are more interested in going to the end than listening to a summary.

In addition, when starting interviews, you should make it clear that confidentiality will be maintained. Tell the interviewee that:

- the information given will be used for research purposes only
- it will not be made widely available without their consent
- they will have the opportunity to check the interview material when the responses are written up
- they will receive a copy of the final report when it is finished.

5. Conducting the interview

In conducting the interview, your aim is three-fold:

1. Keeping the interviewee at ease and comfortable to maximise their responses
2. Ensuring that the interview proceeds smoothly in a structured way
3. Maintaining an efficient way of recording the information collected

Keeping the interviewee at ease

This can be done partly by making the purpose of the interview clear and by starting the interview well (see previous section). It can also be done by means of:

- Body language
- Posture
- Eye contact
- Facial expressions
- Tone of voice
- Active listening

Body language is critical. You should sit neither too close nor too far away from the interviewee (the amount will vary in different cultures—about 4 - 5 feet is acceptable in most western cultures). You should gesture with your hands but not overdo it.

Posture is also important. You should sit upright and lean slightly towards the interviewee to indicate interest in what they are saying. Don't lounge. Your hands should be in front of you and not concealed.

Eye contact is essential. This needs to be done regularly but staring is unacceptable. Glancing at the interviewee every few seconds for 5 - 6 seconds on each occasion is adequate. Spending all your time writing notes will give the impression you are not interested in the interviewee's responses and they may feel uncomfortable about what you are writing.

Facial expressions need to be appropriate. A smile is needed when the interview begins and during the interview at several occasions (if overdone it will make your interviewee uncomfortable). You should also nod your head at appropriate points to indicate acceptance (not agreement).

Tone of voice must communicate interest, warmth, acceptance, be non-judgemental and put your interviewee at ease. A gentle rising of intonation at the end of questions is appropriate.

Fillers are essential features of speech that make the interviewee feel that they are being listened to. Expressions such as: "Uh huh", "OK", "Mmmm", etc. should be used appropriately.

Active Listening is important to maintain the flow of information. There are five key elements to active listening:

1. Asking open-ended questions
2. Using appropriate words and phrases
3. Providing acceptance cues
4. Restating responses
5. Making use of silence

We have already covered open-ended questions and the importance of unbiased and non-leading words and phrases earlier. Acceptance cues consist of good body language, posture, eye contact, facial expressions, fillers and tone of voice. These were mentioned above. Points 4 and 5 will be discussed below.

Restating the interviewee's responses

A good technique for active listening is to restate the response given by the interviewee. However, like other things, this must not be overdone. The following situations may require restatement:

- When encouragement of the interviewee is needed (this enables expansion of the information to occur)
- When describing a problem or issue
- When understanding needs to be checked
- When personality factors obstruct the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee.

When restating responses, avoid the following:

- Echoing the exact words
- Overusing restatement
- Changing the point being made by the interviewee
- Turning the restatement into a question

Doing any of the above is likely to irritate the interviewee.

Examples of effective vs. ineffective restatements of an interviewee response

Interviewee Response: We continue to sell products to customers who have not paid their bills.

Effective Restatement: The system processes orders to customers who are bad credit risks. (Encourages interviewee to expand).

Ineffective Restatement: Why don't you check the customer's credit status before processing the order? (Distorts interviewee's meaning).

(Kremer, 2005)

Making use of silence

An interview should not be like an exam in which the person being interviewed is made to rush and feel stressed. It should be a pleasant experience. To achieve this, do not underestimate the effect of a pause. This can be used to allow the interviewee to collect their thoughts, and after a response to encourage further elaboration. A pause can also help you, the interviewer, recall what it is important to ask next.

It is a good idea to practice all of the above with a classmate before the real interview. You will quickly find that interviewing is a real skill.

6. Managing data collected during the interview

Managing the data you collect during an interview is critical. You need to decide on how information is to be recorded.

- **Note taking** needs to be kept to a bare minimum. Watching someone take copious notes during an interview is distracting and unprofessional. You will only be able to capture key words and later elaborate on them. This might need to be practiced before an interview.
- **Taping** an interview also has its problems. The interviewee can feel intimidated and unwilling to expand on their points in enough detail. Transcribing data from tape recordings takes a long time.
- **Videorecording** interviews is the most intimidating of all for the interviewee, and is best avoided.

Possibly the best form of data management is note taking. But it needs to be carefully planned. Pre-organise note taking sheets with key categories already written down. Take notes of key points in 2 - 3 word phrases. Maintain your eye contact before writing down more points. When the interview is finished immediately expand on the notes and give a copy to your interviewee to check for accuracy.

Common mistakes of inexperienced interviewers

- Sitting back in a chair with arms folded across the chest (this posture implies a lack of openness to what is being said and may also indicate that the analyst is ill at ease).
- Looking at objects in the room or staring out the window instead of looking at the interviewee. (This behaviour suggests that the analyst would rather be somewhere else doing other things, the interviewee will often cut the interview short).
- Taking excessive notes or visually reviewing notes. (An analyst who records rather than listening may arouse interviewee concerns over what is being written).
- Sitting too far away or too close. (Sitting too far away often communicates that the analyst is intimidated by the interviewee, while sitting too close may communicate an inappropriate level of intimacy and make the interviewee uncomfortable).

(Kremer, 2005)

References

Clarke, D. (2003). *Interpretive and Case Study Research*. (Notes) Education Faculty, the University of Melbourne.

Dick, B. (1998). *Convergent Interviewing: A Technique for Qualitative Data Collection*, Accessed 1/8/05 from, <http://www.scu.edu.au/gcm/ar/iview.html>]

Hurworth, R. (1996). Qualitative Methodology: Common Questions about Running Focus Groups During Evaluations. *Evaluation News and Comment*, 5 (1): pp. 48-52.

Kremer, R. (2005). Data Gathering, Accessed 1/8/05 from: <http://pages.cpsc.ucalgary.ca/~kremer/courses/451/DataGather.html>