

# How to Synthesize Interviews

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

Business process redesign work heavily relies on information gathering through online research, and most importantly interviews with key stakeholders in the process. Interviews provide a vast gamut of information that must be synthesized to develop a narrative for the process to drive recommendations to improve the process.

## Purpose

To develop a holistic view of information gathered from interviews to identify problem areas and formulate effective recommendations

## Target Audience

Anyone conducting a business process improvement project for their unit

## Background

The most critical component of any process re-engineering effort involves defining the core underlying problem(s) in the process. This requires a thorough understanding of the process at hand. One of the necessary ways to acquire the information about a process is to interview people who interact with it on a daily basis. While there are other tools which should be used in parallel, interviewing remains a cornerstone to knowledge gathering and synthesis. Even though interviewing may be seen as overly time consuming, acquiring information through a bottom-up process allows for identification of finite details that may have been missed in a top down analysis. In addition, a bottom up approach fosters buy-in from people directly involved in the process, not just the management. Interviews gather a substantial amount of information, but synthesizing details provides a clear, comprehensive view of the process.

## Interviewing

### Interview Questions

Generally, the first step is developing a set of questions to guide the interview and make sure key areas of the process are addressed. The questions should be general in nature and provide an overall framework of the process, but with tailored language related to the process. Questions that lead to “yes/no” answers should be followed up with “how” or “why” to probe for further details. Let the interviewee do the majority of the talking, and only interject to ask clarifying questions, or paraphrase to make sure you understood what they said. Many times you will need to modify your questions during the interview, or re-order them based on how the conversation goes. While it is important to try and touch on all the different topics, it is usually very helpful to follow the direction of your interviewee as they share important information even if that doesn't follow your outlined questions. If you notice that you are getting too far off track and are discussing things that are out of scope for your project, that may be a good time to interject and bring the interview back to the topics you outlined.

### Interview Documentation

When taking notes during an interview, try to record all of the information provided from the interviewee and do not worry about organization. The most important thing is to capture as much information as possible! It is helpful to have another person with you taking notes during the interview because it may be difficult to lead the interview and take detailed notes at the same time. A second person may also be able to provide a different perspective and may also capture details that were overlooked. After the interview is over and when the information is fresh in your mind, you may want to do a quick edit to your notes to fill in any gaps that you didn't have time to thoroughly document during the meeting.

For more information regarding developing interview questions, and conducting interviews, reference Chapter 5 of “Workflow Modeling” by Alec Sharp and Patrick McDermott.

## Synthesizing Interview Notes

### Step 1: Re-read the notes

To start, do a quick read through of the notes starting from the earliest interviews to the most recent. This will help reacquaint yourself with the content and start mentally organizing the information. As you are reading through, make mental notes of patterns of topics and recurring pain points to help guide the compiling process. Do not worry about organizing any information at this point as it will seem daunting and will take more time overall than compiling notes later. In addition, start generating ideas for categories to compile information into.

### Step 2: Develop areas of conversation (categories)

Based on information gathered from the interviews, breakdown the process into categories of functional areas. The categories identify the major milestones that occur in the process and do not define the sub-processes associated with the process. Categories should define common threads of information between interviews, which may show deviations in processes between departments. If you are having trouble identifying categories, look at areas where additional clarifying questions were asked about a topic. Once the list of categories is developed go back through the notes and tag content related to each category. After tagging all of the documents for the content based on categories compile the information into a single document based off of these categories. In the interest of time, you can also compile information while simultaneously tagging information. The end product is an organized set of qualitative information from the interviews where more robust analysis can be conducted upon. Categories are also a useful tool to foster buy-in from stakeholders since it frames the process based on terminology they understand.

### Step 3: Align notes with enablers

Businesses processes are extremely complex with various entities interacting around set guidelines. A business process is assisted from 6 core enablers; process design, IT systems, motivation and measurement, HR, policies and rules, and facilities. Using the previously developed categories as a starting point, consolidate the information further into the respective enablers. The enablers describe how issues are specifically hindering

the process. During this process be sure to step through the enablers only focusing on one at a time. This helps to look in depth at each enabler avoiding a common default to IT systems. This is beneficial to understand where the trouble areas are in the process and to develop recommendations that succinctly fix these core functional areas. If issues potentially go into two different enablers choose the enabler that has higher impact on the process. For more information regarding strategies on compiling notes, refer to the “Organizing Interview Notes” document.

#### **Step 4: Create a list of pain points**

A pain point is a general area of concern that results in frustration for an actor in the process. Go back through the interview notes more thoroughly and start generating a list of the pain points making note of who brought up the statement. Identifying who said the pain point develops the narrative, and allows for detection of differences in processes between units, departments, colleges, etc. Adding a question in the interview directly related to pain points in the process makes the information easier to compile. If you are having trouble identifying pain points, another effective technique is the Stakeholder Analysis tool (see supporting documentation) which assembles “what they like” and “what they do not like” about processes based on actors. The pain points can then be identified from the information in the “what they do not like” column. It is important to sift between what is a functional issue with the process, and what is a personal preference of the interviewee. Some processes inherently require steps that cause annoyances based on compliance requirements. Enablers can be applied to decipher between process breakdowns and personal preferences. Next, align the pain points with the enablers to further develop the narrative for the process. From this organization, identify the two key enablers that are the area of focus for process reengineering efforts.

#### **Step 5: Develop a current-state swimlane diagram**

Now that the information is organized into categories, and aligned with enablers and pain points, the current-state swimlane diagram can be developed. Start from the triggering event and sequentially work your way through the process. Identify senders and receivers of information to establish hand-off points within the process. Utilize timeframes provided by the interviewees to identify possible areas where delays occur

in the process. This includes IT data dumps/transfers, physical document movement, supervisor approval, etc. Consistently refer back to interview notes for validation of process steps, hand-offs, and time delays. Look for patterns that arise in the swimlane model, which identifies areas of redundancy. If the same actors are involved in a similar order there is an opportunity to consolidate the steps into a single sequence. Identify areas where time delays are required to explore the possibility of mitigating these breaks. Make note of any uncertainties within the diagram that will require further clarification. Use part of a workshop session to have stakeholders validate the process steps and sequence of the swimlane diagram. For information regarding how to make a swimlane diagram, refer to Chapter 8 of “Workflow Modeling” by Alec Sharp and Patrick McDermott.

### **Step 6: Identify overall themes**

Develop a few (three or four) underlying themes that encompass all of the pain points. These themes define the cause for action for the process. After developing the themes for the process, align the themes with enablers of the process. This helps identify what is specifically wrong with an enabler, and how it is affecting the process. In addition, it also provides validation that recommendations are fixing not only the underlying issue, but are implemented within the correct enabler. This shows the direct effect the pain points and enablers have on the various parts of the process. Use the current-state swimlane as a source identifying themes too since it visually shows inefficiencies of the process. From this point, ideation of potential solutions and developing the idealized state swimlane diagram can start.