Best Practices in Interviewing

University Process Innovation

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND
UNIVERSITY PROCESS INNOVATION

Introduction

Conducting interviews is an important part of a process improvement effort. Information gathered from interviews inform everything from the assessment summaries we create to the recommendations we make. Using interviews can also help provide information above and beyond that of surveys because it can provide to you the details and context surrounding responses. Thus, it is important to make sure that you are collecting accurate and thorough information from your interviewees. The following will review best practices in interviewing actors of the process. More information about the context and what to do with the data you collect can be found in the University Process Innovation Handbook.

Preparing for the Interview

Inadequate interview preparation can lead to unhelpful and imprecise information collection and wasted time for both the interviewer and interviewee, and can make drawing conclusions difficult. Below are some general best practice tips to help you prepare for your interview.

1. ***Consider your goals.*** Before conducting an interview, it is essential that you prepare your questions ahead of time to make efficient use of your time during the interview. First, you should determine the goals of the interview. What do you want to get out of it? Your goals will drive the questions that you create. After considering your goals, you should list very general, overarching questions or hypotheses that you'd like answered, and generate a pool of questions that will address your overarching questions.

2. ***Do some background research.*** Next, you should consider doing research beforehand. You should come prepared with informed questions for the interviewee – you do not want to spend time asking questions about things that could easily be found on a website. Research may include identifying the individual's background and job position, and exploring resources that already exist online. For example, if you are interviewing an individual about their role in course registration, you may want to first research the course registration website before asking questions. Then, you can ask to clarify any questions that

came up during your research and summarize your findings, and refine any of the questions that you have created. You may find that what is found in your research does not actually fit the reality of the process, or that there are many steps that are not included. Another benefit of conducting background research ahead of time is that it conveys a sense of respect to your interviewees. Not doing research ahead of time will lead the interviewee to believe that you are not respecting their time, and/or that you are not taking the interview seriously.

3. ***Organize your questions.*** Once you have a list of questions you would like to ask your interviewee, you should then order the question in a way that makes sense. More information about types of questions to ask during interviews can be found in our "How to Synthesize Interviews" guide. It is best practice to use a funnel approach to the presentation of your questions – move from broad questions to more specific. General questions and topics may explore the interviewee's role in the process and any changes in their role, and challenges and frustrations they have. Save more challenging and difficult questions for later in the interview. Consider arranging questions by topic to keep the conversation organized in a logical way and to avoid bouncing around from topic to topic. Also, make sure that your questions are not double or triple-barreled; ask only one question at a time.

4. ***Prepare an interview protocol.*** Though it is not advised that you interview while reading off of a script, you should prepare a protocol that includes questions that you want to ask your interviewee. You should consider this protocol a framework, not a prescription for your interview. Your interview questions should be clear and easy for you to refer to during the interview. You may also want to include instructions to refer to during the interview that helps your conversation flow smoothly (e.g., "IF PARTICIPANT ANSWERED X, SKIP THIS QUESTION"). This could be particularly helpful for use during the first few interviews, when you are just getting used to asking the questions you have created.

   Before conducting the first interview, it is important that you first pilot your interview questions on a few individuals who did not help create the interview questions. Piloting your questions allows you to receive feedback about what questions need to be adjusted before beginning the other interviews. You may wish to pilot your questions on individuals knowledgeable about the process, given that it will give you a realistic perspective about what questions will work with future interviews, and which will not.

Conducting the Interview

1. ***Contacting interviewees.*** Prior to conducting your first interview, your project sponsor should send an email to interviewees that informs them that they will be receiving an interview request for an ongoing project. Because your interview request may be the first contact that you have with your interviewees, it is important that they are well informed about the project and purpose of the interview beforehand. In your initial email to interviewees, introduce yourself and the project. Be sure to keep track of the interview dates and time that you set up in a shared spreadsheet (see the UPI Handbook for an example spreadsheet). The day before a scheduled interview, you should reach out to the interviewee and confirm the time and location of the interview. At this time, you may also wish to send some overarching interview questions to your interviewee so they can have a broad sense of what types of questions they will be asked (see Appendix A for an example).

2. ***Begin the interview.*** If possible, interviews should be conducted in teams of two, so one person can take notes while the other asks questions. As a general rule of thumb, the interview team should not be greater than N + 1, where N is the number of people being interviewed. One person should take the lead in conducting the interview. This can help you avoid overwhelming the interviewee(s).

   When meeting your interviewee for the first time, you should find ways to build rapport quickly. Begin by explaining who you are, and the purpose of the interview. Remind the interviewee that everything they say is confidential, and that their answers to questions will not be shared individually, but will be synthesized with others' responses when shared. If they know that their information will not be shared directly with others, your interviewee will feel more comfortable freely sharing information. Before diving into the questions, ask the individual what goals they would like to accomplish, both overall and in regards to the particular process. Provide an opportunity for the interviewee to ask any questions before you begin and provide opportunity for the interviewee to vent any of their frustrations about the situation. Make sure that you do not have the interview environment set up as an interrogation. Instead, make sure the interviewee is aware that this is more of a conversation, and be mindful of your body language and seating position throughout the interview. Throughout the interview, do not forget to smile!

3. *Follow up on unclear answers.* Once you begin asking questions, do not be afraid to ask follow up questions that seem simplistic about things you do not understand. Asking simple questions aids in clarifying any misconceptions you might have in the moment and can help avoid the regret that accompanies missed question opportunities. "Why", "what", and "how" are key clarification questions. Asking clarification questions in the moment is important because it is harder to get in touch with the person again to ask follow up questions after the interview has concluded than it is to ask clarification questions during the interview. It is also important to make sure that you do not confuse an individual's confidence for competence – just because they speak confidently does not mean that what they are saying reflects reality. Using clarification questions can help you see reality more clearly.

4. *Use neutral probes and summarize.* Similarly, you should use neutral probes to help zero in on specifics about what the person is talking about. Phrases such as, "Tell me more about that," and, "What do you mean when you say X" can help the interviewee expand their thoughts. You should also periodically summarize what the individual is saying. By summarizing, the interviewee has the opportunity to clear up any confusion you may have, as well as add more information onto the summary. Summaries also let the interviewee know that you are engaged in what they are saying and they also help you by giving you a chance to process the information before moving on to the next question.

5. ***Listen carefully to the interviewee.*** Most important, you should be sure to listen carefully to what the interviewee is saying, and do not overly concern yourself with sticking to your scripted questions. Additionally, don't assume you know what the interviewee is going to say. Even if you have heard several people talk on the same topic, listen carefully for new information or non-overt attitudes. Sometimes an interviewee may take you on a tangent that is more helpful than the questions you would have asked. As Lawrence Grobel eloquently wrote in his book, The Art of the Interview, "If you are just trying to get your questions answered, you may not be hearing what someone is saying." Often a person will also answer many of your questions at the same time so be sure not to ask repetitive questions.

Post-Interview Wrap-Up

As soon as possible, write up a summary and clean up your notes about the interview. Back up any audio files and notes that you have. After, interviewers should debrief together to make sure they heard the same things during the interview, and verify that the notes are complete.

Within 24 hours of your interview, send your interviewee a thank you email. Let them know that you may be in touch with them in the future with any follow up questions that you may have. It may be a good idea to periodically update your interviewees every few weeks with updates on the project. By updating them, you can help them to see how the project is going and give them the opportunity to provide further input about the project.

Interview Checklist:

- ❑ Preparing for the Interview
  - Goals Planned
  - Background Research Conducted
  - Questions Drafted
  - Interview Protocol Created
  - Reminder Email Sent
- ❑ Conducting the Interview
  - Purpose of Interview Explained
  - Answers Clarified
  - Probes and Summaries Implemented
- ❑ Post-Interview Wrap-Up
  - Notes Cleaned

Information in this guide was gathered from Alec Sharp of Clariteq Systems Consulting and from Lawrence Grobel's The Art of the Interview, Chaunsey Wilson's Interview Techniques for UX Practitioners: A User-Centered Design Method, and Gail Sedorkin's Interviewing: A Guide for Journalists and Writers.

Appendix A

Example of Pre-Interview Questions Email

Hello X,

I wanted to reach out to you to confirm that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, X at X. Tomorrow's interview will not follow a scripted list of questions. Instead, it will be more open-ended, and driven in part by what you think we need to know. If you're more comfortable doing some preparation in advance of the interviews, here are three topics that we may touch upon tomorrow.

1. *Roles and responsibilities:*
   What is the main responsibility of your area, what is your role within it, and can you identify five or so activities that take up most of your time?

   a. First, in general, then anything that is specific to "[insert process here]."

   b. What other groups do you interact with, and which systems do you use?

2. *Current initiatives:*
   Are there any initiatives in your area we should be aware of? Are there specific goals and objectives you and/or your group is working towards?

3. *Issues and challenges*:
   Are there any particular challenges you or your organization are currently facing? What would you change if you could? Please describe any aspects of the current state that are no longer acceptable and must change. Can you also identify any aspects of the current state you would like preserved?

Again, this isn't a script we'll follow in the interviews, but it should provide an idea of the topics we'll cover, and might trigger some ideas you'll want to raise in the interviews.

Thanks in advance for your time.

These questions are taken with permission from Alec Sharp of Clariteq Systems Consulting