

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS

Tips for conducting program evaluation

You have identified information to help you answer your evaluation questions and developed a plan to collect it. In the last tip sheet, we discussed strategies for developing and collecting surveys. In this tip sheet, we provide recommendations for conducting interviews.



When to consider using an interview

Interviews allow you to gather information from respondents by asking them questions directly (rather than having them complete answers on their own, such as by filling out a questionnaire). Interviews may be done in-person or by telephone. Interviews tend to be more time-consuming and expensive

to conduct than surveys, but can also yield a better response rate. Interviews are most useful when you need in-depth information about people's experiences or perspectives or when you want to interact with your respondents, by clarifying questions or providing them with information.

Types of interviews

Interviews vary in their degree of structure and formality. Less formal interviews may be useful if you are exploring a broad topic or conducting interviews with very diverse participants. More structured interviews are useful when it is important to collect consistent information across all of your participants. Interviews generally fall somewhere along the following continuum:

1. **Informal, conversational interview** —
No predetermined questions are asked, in order to remain open and adaptable to the respondents' nature and priorities.
2. **Semi-structured interview** —
The same general areas of information are collected from each respondent, providing more focus than the informal

approach. However, the specific questions, and the way that they are asked, may vary each time, allowing some flexibility in getting information.

3. **Structured interview** —
All respondents are asked exactly the same questions and provided with a consistent set of response options. While this approach is less flexible, it makes it easier to analyze and report responses.

When interviews are structured, it is important that they be done consistently each time. If more than one person is going to conduct interviews, provide training in advance, including opportunities to conduct practice interviews.

The interview process



Explaining the project to potential respondents

While people are usually willing to be interviewed, some may refuse. People are more likely to agree to an interview when their initial contact with an interviewer is positive. On making initial contact:

- Maintain a positive attitude and be enthusiastic.
- Explain the purpose of the interview, the kinds of questions you will ask, how long the interview usually takes, and how the information will be used.
- Allow the respondent to ask questions before beginning the interview.
- If someone seems reluctant to participate, ask about their concern or objection and try to address it – this is more effective than being pushy.

Practice your introduction before contacting respondents...people respond more favorably when you sound like yourself and not as though you are reading from a script.

Conducting the interview

Interviews allow you to establish rapport with respondents. Before starting, use small talk to give yourself and the person you are interviewing a chance to get comfortable.

Once you begin the interview:

- Ask questions at a reasonable pace.
- If the interview is structured, read each question exactly as written and in the same order every time.
- Read the entire question before accepting an answer.
- When asked to repeat a question, repeat the entire question.

- Do not skip a question because it was answered earlier or because you think you know the answer.
- Encourage responses with occasional nods of the head, "uh huh"s, etc.
- Provide transition between major topics, e.g., "we've been talking about (some topic) and now I'd like to move on to (another topic)."
- Do not count on your memory to recall their answers. Ask for permission to record the interview or take notes.
- Do not allow the person you are interviewing to continually get off topic. If the conversation drifts, ask follow-up questions to redirect the conversation to the subject at hand.
- Avoid getting into casual conversation or discussing issues, topics, and viewpoints that are related or unrelated to questions on the survey.

If you plan to conduct the interview in person, be thoughtful about where it will take place. Make sure the location is comfortable for the respondent, such as their home, work place, or other location they prefer. The setting should be quiet and private, so that you can conduct the interview without violating confidentiality.

Avoiding bias

One disadvantage of interviews is the possibility of respondents changing their answers to please the interviewer or avoid embarrassment. It is important to prevent bias when conducting interviews. Do not express your own attitudes, opinions, prejudices, thoughts, or feelings during the interview.

The following tips can help you avoid influencing the respondent’s answers:

- Do not show surprise, approval, or disapproval with your words, gestures, or expressions to anything the respondent says or does.
- Do not disagree or argue with someone even if they express opinions you feel are wrong.
- Do not become too familiar or casual by sharing personal information.
- Do not laugh too much or make the interview seem like a friendly conversation.
- Do not seek clarification in a way that leads the respondent toward one particular answer.

Probing for more information

Interviews provide the opportunity for you to explain or clarify questions, and allow you to explore topics in more depth than you can with a survey. Use “probe” questions to obtain more information about answers that are incomplete, unclear, or irrelevant. Common probes include: “Could you be more specific?,” “Could you give me an example,?” or “Could you explain that?.” Probes should be asked in a neutral way, and

should not be used to pester or coerce someone into answering uncomfortable questions.

Other recommendations for using probes:

- Never use leading probes. If you are not sure what a respondent means, ask the question again or ask for clarification.
- Probe responses to closed-ended questions if the respondent selects an answer that was not on your list. Repeat the entire list of options, instead of trying to guess what was meant.
- Respondents sometimes say “Don’t Know” because they didn’t understand the question, didn’t hear the entire question, or are not sure how to answer. If someone says that they “don’t know” an answer, probe at least once. Reading the question again can be effective.
- If someone does not want to answer a question, probe one time. If he or she still doesn’t answer the question, move on to the next question. Sometimes it is helpful to reassure the respondent that all answers are confidential.
- Probe for clarification and inconsistencies. Make sure that you understand what the respondent is saying. If you don’t understand what a respondent means, ask,

Process, page 4

| Probing examples: SURVEY QUESTION | RESPONSE | GOOD PROBE | WRONG!! |
|---|----------------------------|--|--|
| What did you like best about the program? | I don’t know. | Whatever you think is fine. | Didn’t you like the staff? |
| How many nights did you stay in the shelter? | Oh, about 10 or 12 nights. | Would that be closer to 10 or to 12? | Interviewer writes 11. |
| How would you improve the program? | Everything! | Please be more specific? | You mean you didn’t like anything? |
| What is your race or ethnicity? | Well, I’m a mixture. | A mixture? | Are you part Black or Hispanic? |
| How much would you agree that the services you received were useful? Would you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree? | I think they were okay. | So . . . would you say you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly agree? | (Interviewer records “agree” without probing further). |

Process, continued

- Probe for details when needed. Use probes to get a complete response that fully answers the question.
- Stop probing when you have obtained the necessary information, the respondent becomes annoyed or irritated, or the respondent has nothing more to say.

Conducting focus groups

Focus groups are interviews conducted with a small group of participants simultaneously. Focus groups share many advantages with interviews, while also allowing you to generate insights based on the interactions among participants. Many of the recommendations for conducting interviews also apply to focus groups. In addition, consider the following tips:

- If possible, have someone trained in group facilitation conduct the group.
- Keep the number of questions reasonable – you can generally expect to thoroughly address 5-7 questions during a 1.5 hour focus group.
- Make it easy for people to participate, by providing transportation, child care, or refreshments as appropriate.
- Establish ground rules to ensure that participants feel comfortable, stay focused, and respect the privacy of others.
- Select participants who are opinionated and comfortable sharing information in a group.
- Limit participation to 6-10 individuals.
- Allow opportunities for each person to share information, rather than letting a few people dominate the conversation.
- Have a second person take notes and help facilitate the group if needed.

Quick links to more information

Free Management Library's "General Guidelines for Conducting Interviews"

(Adapted from the Field Guide to Consulting and Organizational Development)
<http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/interview.htm>

Designing and Conducting Focus Group Interviews by Richard A. Krueger

http://www.shadac.umn.edu/img/assets/18528/FocGrp_Krueger_Oct02.pdf

In future tip sheets

Ethical issues in conducting evaluations (10/07)

Analyzing and understanding data (1/08)

Communicating evaluation results (4/08)

Find previous tip sheets on the web: www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm or www.wilderresearch.org.

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