Interviewing Techniques

Definition

Interviewing is the meeting of two people for the purpose of exchanging information and ideas through questions and responses. This exchange involves communication and leads to joint understanding about a particular topic.

Purpose

The purpose of interviewing is to discover what is on/in someone's mind, not to put ideas in the person's mind. The type of questions that the one asks in an interview is instrumental in determining the value of data collected in interviews. Care must be taken not to lead the person being interviewed in a particular direction. Consequently, the quality of information gained in an interview is based very much on the skills of the interviewer. Interviewers must proceed with the assumption that the knowledge and experience of the person being interviewed is of value, and it is the interviewers job to uncover that knowledge and experience.

Types of interviews

- *Informal conversational interview*
  This type interview relies on the generation of questions that naturally arise based on observations in a setting. It is conversational in nature, and the person being interviewed may not even realize they are being interviewed.

- *General interview guide*
  In this type interview, the interviewer prepares an outline of issues/topics to be discussed in the interview. The interviewer does not write specific questions in advance, but asks questions during the interview based on the outline of topics to be discussed. The interviewer is flexible with respect to the order and wording of questions. The prepared outline serves as a guide to help the interviewer make good use of limited time with the interviewee and cover key topics.

- *Standardized open-ended interview*
  In this type interview, the interviewer prepares a set of questions in advance and uses the same wording and order with each person interviewed. This type interview is used when it is important to pose the same questions to each interviewee. This type interview would most likely be used if different members of a team were trying to gather specific information from employees at the same or different locations. It guarantees that each team member is gathering the same information. It is also highly focused which is an important feature if one has limited time for the interview.

- *Closed, fixed response interview*
  This type interview is essentially a verbal questionnaire. Questions and choices of responses are determined in advance. The interviewee selects from the given responses.

- *Focus group interviews*
  This type interview is a group interview conducted by a moderator with a fixed set of questions. Focus group interview helps the interviewer understand the culture and language of an organization. Its value comes from data gathered from the interactions that occur within the group. This can lead to a better understanding of a situation since participants are interacting with each other rather than the interviewer.

Examples of Types of Questions

Descriptive questions
- Describe a typical workday.
- Describe what you do as you prepare company materials for distribution.
- Describe your experience as a participant in the FrontPage seminar.

Follow-up questions
- You said that preparing the spreadsheet was particularly frustrating. What makes it frustrating?
- You said that you liked a more structured approach to learning a new application. Describe how you like to learn a new application.
- You said that you found communication among members of your team to be very strained. What do you think is the cause of this difficulty?

Experience/Example/Behavior questions
- You said that you found learning new skills frustrating. Can you give me an example of a skill that you found frustrating to learn and describe how you attempted to learn the skill.
- If I followed you through a typical day, what would I see you doing?
- You said that you don't like an applications program to surprise you. Can you describe an example of an experience you had when an applications program surprised you?

Compare/Contrast questions
- You said that there was a big difference between the way you currently enter data and the way you did it in the previous application. Describe some of these differences.

Clarification questions
- You said that you preferred practical learning. What do you mean by practical learning?

- Can you give me an example of practical learning activity that you have experienced?

Opinion/Values questions
- What would you like to see happen when you click this button?
- What changes do you think should be made in this application?

Knowledge questions
- How many people use this application?
- What kind of training is offered on this application?
- Who provides the training? · Background/Demographic questions
- How long have you worked in this department?
- What is your highest level of education?
- What is your age?

Role-playing/Simulation questions
- Suppose I am a new member of your team and I ask you what I should do to be a successful team member. What would you tell me?

Interviewing Strategies

- Begin an interview by explaining succinctly the purpose of the interview and how the information will be used. Example: The purpose of this interview is to get information that will help us design a system that will be easy to use and meet the needs of those using it.
- Keep the interview on track. Maintain control of the interview by knowing what you want to find out, asking the right questions to get that information, and giving appropriate feedback to the interviewee. Time for interviews is usually limited, so it is important to redirect responses that are irrelevant and to control the length of time devoted to lengthy digressions.
- Allow interviewees to respond to questions in their own words and to express their perspectives. Avoid leading questions or questions that slant the answers given in a particular direction. The way a question is worded is very important in how the interviewee will respond to the question.
- Questions should be open-ended allowing the interviewees to respond in their own words. There are a few exceptions, such as demographic questions and knowledge questions.
- Minimize or intersperse demographic questions with other type questions to avoid making interviewees uncomfortable.
- Avoid phrasing questions so that they suggest a "yes" or "no" answer. Instead of asking "Were you the trainer for this program", ask "what was your role in this program?"
- Avoid jumping in to fill silences. Give the interviewee time to formulate answers. The interviewer should not do more talking than the interviewee. The interviewee should not be simply confirming or denying statements made by the interviewer.

- Assume the interviewee has something to say, and phrase your questions to indicate that. Instead of asking "have you learned anything from using this application", ask "what have you learned from using this application?"
- Ask clear, singular questions.. Avoid asking multiple questions without giving the interviewee a chance to respond to each question individually. Avoid asking "How easy is the program to use and what do you like and dislike about it?" Break the question into a series of three questions.
- Ask questions that are understandable to the interviewee. Use correct terminology if specialized terminology is used in the setting, and know what terminology interviewees use among themselves with respect to the application. Avoid using jargon unless you are sure the jargon are used in the setting and that you are using the jargon correctly.
- In general, avoid why questions that seem to challenge the interviewee. Why questions might imply that a person's response is not appropriate. "Why do you say that?"
- Try to establish a rapport with the interviewee by asking neutral quesions - questions that encourage the interviewee to respond honestly without feeling you are judging the answers.
- Sometimes it helps to phrase clarifying questions in the form of an example. The examples should be balanced between positive and negative kinds of responses. Some employees have told me that they never use the documentation for this application, while others have told me that they cannot use the application without regularly using the documentation. What has been your experience using the application?
- Make a transition statement when the direction of the questions is going to change. "We have been talking about the documentation for the application, now I'd like to ask you some questions about the actual application itself".
- Even if you tape record an interview, it is important to take observation notes as well. A headshake does not record well.
- Take an interest in what the interviewee is saying. Be sensitive to and respect the person being interviewed.

Additional Comments

- Raw data of interviews are the actual words spoken by the interviewee. The interviewer job is to capture the raw data.
- Keep track of questions asked as well as the responses. · A tape recorder is extremely important when doing interviews. Be sure to ask the interviewee if you can tape the interview. If an interviewer attempts to write comments word for word, the interview will essentially grind to a halt while the interviewer writes the notes.
- Check to make sure your tape recorder is working (and batteries are not dead) before beginning the interview.
- Using a tape recorder does not eliminate the need to take notes. The notes can be used to note particularly important responses, non-verbal actions, and to focus the interviewer's attention on the interviewee. The interviewer can also use notes to

jot down ideas for follow up questions in response to statements being made by the interviewee.

- Immediately after the interview, record observations about the interview itself.
- Transcribing notes is very important. It is also extremely time consuming. To save some time, listen to the entire tape, noting irrelevant discussion. When transcription is done, only transcribe relevant comments.
- If you discover inconsistencies or vagueness when transcribing interview notes, check back with the interviewee for clarification. This can often be done by phone.