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What is an Interview?

An interview is a conversation for gathering information. A research interview involves an interviewer, who coordinates the process of the conversation and asks questions, and an interviewee, who responds to those questions. Interviews can be conducted face-to-face or over the telephone. The internet is also emerging as a tool for interviewing.

When is an Interview an Appropriate Research Method?

Interviews are an appropriate method when there is a need to collect in-depth information on people's opinions, thoughts, experiences, and feelings. Interviews are useful when the topic of inquiry relates to issues that require complex questioning and considerable probing. Face-to-face interviews are suitable when your target population can communicate through face-to-face conversations better than they can communicate through writing or phone conversations (e.g., children, elderly or disabled individuals).

Types of Interviews

Interviews can be designed differently depending on the needs being addressed and the information. They can be grouped into three types:

Structured interviews: In a structured interview, the interviewer asks a set of standard, predetermined questions about particular topics, in a specific order. The respondents need to select their answers from a list of options. The interviewer may provide clarification on some questions. Structured Interviews are typically used in surveys (see our "Survey Research Methods" Tip Sheet for more information).

Semi-structured interviews: In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer uses a set of predetermined questions and the respondents answer in their own words. Some interviewers use a topic guide that serves as a checklist to ensure that all respondents provide information on the same topics. The interviewer can probe areas

based on the respondent's answers or ask supplementary questions for clarification. Semi-structured interviews are useful when there is a need to collect in-depth information in a systematic manner from a number of respondents or interviewees (e.g., teachers, community leaders).

Unstructured interviews: In an unstructured interview, the interviewer has no specific guidelines, restrictions, predetermined questions, or list of options. The interviewer asks a few broad questions to engage the respondent in an open, informal, and spontaneous discussion. The interviewer also probes with further questions and/or explores inconsistencies to gather more in-depth information on the topic. Unstructured interviews are particularly useful for getting the stories behind respondents' experiences or when there is little information about a topic.

Steps in Conducting an Interview:

Before the Interview:

1. Define your objectives → identify what you want to achieve and the information you need to gather. Make sure an interview is the appropriate way to meet your objectives.
2. Choose the type of interview → Review your required information, budget, time, and potential respondents and decide whether you need to conduct structured, semi-structured, or unstructured interviews.
3. Choose the appropriate respondents → Depending on the type of interview, decide on the characteristics of interviewees and the number of interviews required.
4. Decide how you will conduct the interviews → Consider telephone or face-to-face interviews. For large surveys, consider computer-aided interviewing and recording.
5. Decide how to recruit your respondents → Obtain contact information for a number of respondents larger than the number of interviews you need, since some may not respond. Contact them by phone, e-mail, or regular mail and introduce yourself, your organization, and your project. Explain the purpose of the interview, the importance of their participation, and set up an appointment.

6. Decide how you will record the interviews → Depending on the type of interview, you may fill in a prepared form, use written notes, voice recorders, or computer-aided devices.
7. Make a list of questions and test them with a sample of respondents → the questions must be aligned with the type of interview. If you are running structured interviews, see our Tip Sheets on “Questionnaire Design” and Survey Research Methods” for more information.
8. Decide who will conduct the interviews → develop an information kit that includes an introduction to the research topic and instructions. For unstructured interviews, you may need to hire skilled interviewers.

During the interview:

1. Introduce yourself and initiate a friendly but professional conversation.
2. Explain the purpose of your project, the importance of their participation, and the expected duration of the interview.
3. Be prepared to reschedule the interview if a respondent has a problem with the timing.
4. Explain the format of the interview.
5. Tell respondents how the interview will be recorded and how the collected information will be used → if possible, obtain their written consent to participate.
6. Ask respondents if they have any questions.
7. Control your tone of voice and language → remain as neutral as possible when asking questions or probing on issues.
8. Keep the focus on the topic of inquiry and complete the interview within the agreed time limit.
9. Ensure proper recording → without distracting the respondent, check your notes and voice recorder regularly.
10. Complete the session → make sure all questions were asked, explain again how you will use the data, thank the respondent, and ask them if they have any questions.

After the interview

1. Make sure the interview was properly recorded → make additional notes, if needed.
2. Organize your interview responses → responses from unstructured and semi-structured interviews need to be transcribed. Responses from structured interviews need to be entered into a data analysis program.
3. Get ready for data analysis → search for resources for analyzing qualitative and/or quantitative data.

Checklist for Conducting Interviews:

- Have you identified research questions that will be adequately addressed by using interviews?
- Have you chosen the appropriate type of interview?
- Have you selected an interviewer?
- Have you prepared the list of questions?
- Have you tested them?
- Have you decided on the setting of interviews and how responses should be recorded?
- Have you contacted your respondents and set up appointments?
- Have you obtained enough data for analysis?

For More Information:

Gubrium, J.F & Holstein, J.A. (2001). *Handbook of interview research: context and method*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Crawford, I.M. (1997). *Marketing Research and Information Systems, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*, www.fao.org/docrep/W3241E/w3241e06.htm#types%20of%20personal%20interview

McNamara, C. (1999). *General Guidelines for Conducting Interviews*, Authenticity Consulting, LLC, www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/interview.htm



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