The in-depth interview

Technote

Introduction

Ordinary conversation is the most common form of information collection. The *in-depth interview* merely extends and formalizes everyday conversation. This type of data collection is different from the *structured* or *standardized interview*, where the respondent receives questions with fixed response categories. The in-depth interview, while focused, is discursive and allows the researcher and respondent latitude to explore an issue within the framework of guided conversation.

Despite their potential to gather important information, in-depth interviews are often poorly executed and inadequately reported. Researchers often overlook critical details, let important insights slip by without notice, and report results haphazardly.

In-depth interviews are often dismissed in favour of "objective data" from surveys and quantitative analysis. It is easy to place more value on the results of a telephone survey of 1,000 respondents randomly selected from the general public than on interviews with 30 experts. This suspicion of interviews stems from long-standing biases against qualitative data and concerns that interview reporting is often imprecise and discursive.

Role of in-depth interviews

The in-depth interview has several roles in program evaluation and market research:

▸ exploring the boundaries of a problem
▸ obtaining context for a problem or issue
▸ evaluating potential solutions
▸ managing the research process by supporting the interpretation of results from surveys and other quantitative methods.

At the outset of research, in-depth interviews may determine the spectrum of insights and perspectives that exist about a program, product, or service. This initial exploration can also assist in formulating the problem to be solved.

Preparation for the in-depth interview

Define the purpose of the interview. Before the interview, the researcher must determine what information is required. This information should be incorporated into the overall research framework. The information supplied by the interviews must clearly relate to specific questions that the research seeks to answer, and respondents need to understand why they should take the time to participate.

Structure the interview. Highly skilled interviewers may not appear to be systematic, but all in-depth interviews must have a format and should follow a process. Free-form interviews may be used in the first problem definition phase, but in the hands of inexperienced interviewers, these are often unsatisfactory because key issues are missed or interesting data is ignored.

Script the interview. Although an expert interviewer may not appear to be scripted, the in-depth interview requires a script or protocol. Detailed questions should be prepared and reviewed with the client in advance to ensure that all issues are covered. Consultation with the client and colleagues is essential.

A possible exception to using a script is an interview with a hostile or suspicious informant. A casual approach with this type of respondent may elicit information, whereas a more structured interview may cause the respondent to conceal or omit information.

One mistake to avoid is making the script too long. Most in-depth interviews ought not to exceed 90 minutes, especially if respondents receive no compensation. Many senior managers will be unable to spend more than half an hour, which means that interviews must be focused and efficient.

Prepare the respondent. Respondents must be prepared for in-depth interviews. Confirm the interview (time and place) in writing, and provide a summary of the questions or a general outline of the issues to be reviewed in advance. This may not be the full protocol—

what is given to the interviewee is a matter of discretion. In the case of exploratory interviews, such a list may not be needed.

Respondents are usually busy, so the researcher must delimit the role that the information will play in the research and stress its importance. Emphasizing the critical role of the respondent secures cooperation. Assurance of confidentiality and anonymity must always be given, and it is important to also indicate how much time the interview will take.

Conducting the interview

Interviewing is never haphazard. It is deliberate, paced, and focused on the respondent to the exclusion of all else. If external influences intrude (e.g., telephone calls), the interview will not fulfil its potential.

Initiating the interview. After introductory pleasantries, confirm once again the general purpose of the research, the role that the interview plays, the approximate time required to complete the interview, and the fact that the information will be treated confidentially.

Recording the interview. Recording an interview serves several purposes:

‣ It conveys the intention to "get it right."
‣ It encourages considered responses.
‣ It provides a back-up in case notes are lost.

Always ask permission to record an interview, and if the interview is taking place in person, have the recorder in plain view. Offer to stop recording on request, and be very clear that recording is not a precondition to the interview. Indicate that the recorder is there to ensure that information is accurately reported.

Two issues may arise when recording interviews:

‣ A tape may inhibit frank discussion. Whether or not to use recording is a matter of judgment; however, most respondents will not refuse.

‣ Some interview circumstances may be too sensitive to permit recording. In these cases, the preferences of the respondent are paramount.

Never record without permission. Aside from being unethical, it is often illegal to record an interview without permission. If covert taping is discovered, the respondent may complain to the client or sponsor, or worse, the press. As well, the researcher will be completely discredited.

Interview techniques

The respondent must do 90% of the talking. If this is not happening, either the questions are poor or the respondent is antagonistic to the research. A perceptive interviewer will realize this and change styles.

Opening up a reluctant respondent using a general question can be useful. For example: *"What would you like to see from this program, (policy, department, legislation, etc.) in five years?" "What is your deepest concern about ...?" "If there was one thing you could change....?"*

Interviewers often feel uncomfortable with pauses in the conversation and feel that every moment must be filled. However, these pauses often allow respondents to gather their thoughts and formulate answers.

Take brief notes. Even though the tape recorder is running, taking brief notes is useful. This provides the interviewer with something to do while the respondent formulates answers, and it slows the pace of the interview, allowing the interviewer to ensure that all the key points are covered. Taking notes also sends a message to respondents that their responses are important. It is useful to note the recording time or tape position as key points arise to support review later.

Return to incomplete points. Often respondents do not provide full information the first time a question is posed. Repeat key questions throughout the interview. Do not repeat questions exactly, but use oblique references to encourage respondents to reveal additional facets of a key issue.

Use creative allusions. A statement/question such as *"Some people have told me that_____. What do you think?"* is very useful in getting respondents to open up.

Speculation can help reluctant respondents to open up. For example: *"I'm not sure, but could it be that...?"* Sometimes, statements that are suspected to be false are used to confirm facts.

Conclude interviews with general questions. It is important to conclude the interview with a general question such as, *"Is there anything further that you feel is important?"* and then wait for the respondent to provide a considered response.

Be alert. Even when the recorder is turned off, the interview is not necessarily over. Critical information may be revealed in the few moments of farewell, especially as the respondent relaxes.

Interview notes should be prepared within two hours of the interview. This reduces the time needed to refer to the recording. Make the notes both concise and complete. Assume that the notes will be entered as evidence in a trial; although this is a very unlikely occurrence, it is useful to consider when preparing notes.

Project managers need to review the notes as they are prepared by team members to support adjustments early on. The project team needs to review each other's notes from the start to ensure consistency.

Share the notes with the respondent. It is easy to share notes using email, but be extremely careful to send the correct notes. It is a major gaffe to share the one respondent's notes with another.

Aside from establishing the accuracy of the information, respondents appreciate the courtesy of reviewing your notes. You can also insert additional clarification questions into the notes to extend the analysis. Increasing numbers of clients are asking to receive copies of interview notes. This can only be done if:

a. it is established at time the contract is developed

b. the respondents are informed prior to their interviews

c. respondents review the notes prior to their release to the client

d. respondents' identities are completely purged (unless the respondent agrees that the client can receive notes with names attached)

Follow-up as needed by telephone or email can be useful as additional information is gathered and more questions arise. If a respondent offers new information, it is essential that this be confirmed by making follow-up calls to those previously interviewed. As well, controversial issues may be left for subsequent contact, once more trust has been developed.

Interview report

Collate responses by questions. It is useful to tag responses with some key attribute of the respondent, such as SM for senior managers, FR for federal representatives, etc. If there is more than one interviewer, the research team needs to agree on a coding scheme.

Summarize the findings by interview question. Note where there is consensus among interviewees and where important minority positions emerge. When different groups have contrasting views, bring this out, but be very careful not to inadvertently reveal the opinion of a single individual.

Strive to convey a balanced and complete picture of the information collected. Consider the following summaries for the question, "Should climate change be initiated by government taking the policy lead? What role does business have?"

Example 1. Of the 25 interviewees, 13 stated that government should take the lead, and 12 disagreed.

Example 2. Of the 25 interviewees, 13 indicated that government should take the lead. Most were federal civil servants, although a small number were industry representatives who argued that while business may be most important, governments played a key role in facilitation. Of the 12 who believed that business should take the lead, a large majority were business owners, although two were federal civil servants.

Selective quoting adds to the credibility of the report. A direct quote with attribution may be possible, but usually respondents wish to remain anonymous. Many respondents will be flattered to be quoted, but the researcher must ensure that the quote does not inadvertently identify the respondent. Also, make sure that the quotation either represents a widely-held opinion, or is accurately reported as reflecting the opinion of fewer respondents (e.g., "someone stated...").

Avoid using phrases such as "one respondent said..."; clients react poorly to reports that use that phrase, since it appears that the researcher is stressing a minority opinion. If the observation is important then use "an important observation raised was…."

Case studies are one approach to presenting interviews. A case study should be presented with only general references to the respondent and the organization represented, and only with permission. Case studies can be so evocative that other information may be down-played, so be sure that several cases are presented and that they represent the spectrum of experience.

Research resources

Interviews are expensive. A typical interview requires a minimum of four hours, including scheduling, travel, the actual interview, and write-up. A maximum of two interviews can be accomplished in an eight-hour day by one interviewer (or three if the evening is used), but it is important to be careful of interviewer burnout.

The billing rate for a junior researcher in a private firm will be around $250 to $500 per day. Interviewing senior managers of a company, however, will require the top researchers in a firm, and typical rates for these researchers range from $800 to $1,500 per day.

Additional readings

Crabtree, B. F., & Miller, W. L. (Eds.). (1992). *Doing qualitative research.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

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